

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess
Vol.10

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Illustrator: **You Shiina**







Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played affter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a fourth-year.



Rozemyne

The protagonist. Divine intervention means she now looks old enough to have come of age, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A fourth-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



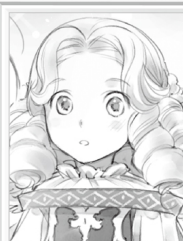
Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



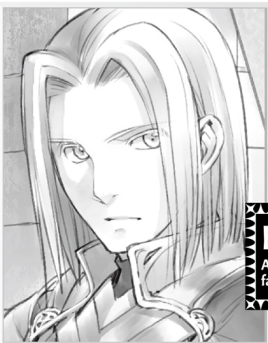
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a third-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

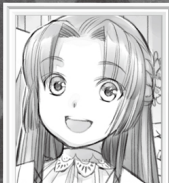
Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

**Ottilie**

Head attendant.
Hartmut's mother.

**Bertilde**

A first-year apprentice
archattendant.
Brunhilde's little sister.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister
and a medattendant.

**Gretia**

A fifth-year apprentice
medattendant. Gave her
name.

**Hartmut**

An archscholar and
the new High Priest.
Ottilie's son.

**Clarissa**

An archscholar.
Engaged to Hartmut.

**Roderick**

A fourth-year apprentice
medscholar. Gave his
name.

**Philine**

A fourth-year apprentice
layscholar.

**Cornelius**

Karstedt's son and an
archknight.

**Leonore**

An archknight.
Engaged to Cornelius.

**Angelica**

Lieseleta's older sister
and a medknight.

**Matthias**

A medknight. Gave his
name.

**Laurenz**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.

**Judithe**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight.

**Damuel**

A layknight.

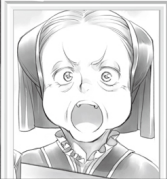
Rozemyne's Retainers

Ehrenfest's Nobility



Brunhilde

Rozemyne's former retainer and Sylvester's fiancée.



Rihyarda

Sylvester's archattendant.

Karstedt

.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira

.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Eckhart

.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus

.....Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Lasfam

.....Ferdinand's layattendant.

Veronica

.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Sovereign Affiliates

Trauerqual.....The Zent.

Magdalena.....The Zent's third wife.

Sigiswald.....The first prince and next Zent.

Anastasius.....The second prince.

Eglantine.....Anastasius's wife.

Hildebrand.....The third prince and Magdalena's son.

Raublut.....The Sovereign knight commander.

Arthur.....Hildebrand's head attendant.

Rauffen.....Dunkelfelger's dormitory supervisor.

Hirschur.....Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor.

Solange.....A medlibrarian.

Schwartz.....A library magic tool.

Weiss.....A library magic tool.

Erwaermen.....A former god. The white tree.

Immanuel.....The Sovereign High Bishop.

Relichion.....The previous Sovereign High Bishop.
Deceased.

Dunkelfelger's Nobility

Sieglinde.....The archduke's first wife.

Lestilaut.....An archducal family member and the next archduke.

Hannelore.....A fourth-year archduke candidate.

Heisshitze.....An archknight.

Ahrensbach's Nobility

Georgine

.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Detlinde

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Georgine's daughter.

Letizia

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.

Alstede

.....An archnoble. Detlinde's elder sister and Georgine's daughter.

Blasius

.....An archnoble. Alstede's husband.

Strahl

.....Ferdinand's archknight. Formerly the knight commander.

Others

Gervasio.....The king of Lanzenave.

Leonzio.....An envoy from Lanzenave.

Giordano.....An envoy from Lanzenave.

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Prologue

The scale tipped and creaked under the weight of the herbs placed atop it. One scholar watched it settle through narrowed eyes before removing some of the herbs, while another set about chopping what remained with messer. Detlinde's elder sister, Alstede, was stirring the pot they were brewing with.

Oh, how dull this is...

Detlinde couldn't help but sigh. As part of her plan to obtain the Grutrissheit, she was staying in a villa on the Royal Academy's grounds. She was waiting quite impatiently in its brewing room, watching her sister and retainers work.

Her boredom aside, Detlinde had known well in advance that it would take them many days to secure the Grutrissheit. She had no qualms about the villa's bed and board; it was meant for princesses from Lanzenave, so the furniture and such were of the highest quality imaginable, and the rooms were outfitted with all the magic tools one would need to live comfortably. They had already brought chefs, servants, and provisions from the Lanzenave Estate, but that wasn't all—Raublut, who had prepared the villa for them in the first place, had given them attendants and other supplies from his own home, meaning they even had servers tending to their needs.

On the night of their arrival—or perhaps the following day—something unexpected must have occurred, for Raublut had ordered everyone to stay in the villa. Some voiced their worries and concerns, but Detlinde was unfazed; being stuck in the villa meant she could spend each day as she pleased.

These really are tough times... Everyone expects so much from me.

Detlinde chuckled. The Lanzenavians had showered her with praise for teaching them to brew rejuvenation potions. They had watched longingly as she'd ridden her highbeast and then listened intently while learning to create their own. It was thanks to her that they could now make themselves full sets of armor and produce their own mounts. Yes, her *knights* had technically taught them how to shape their armor, but the accomplishments of retainers

belonged to their charge.

The more she thought about it, the more favorable her circumstances seemed to be. Her jealous fiancé wasn't around to complain about her relationship with Leonzio, and there were no scholars demanding that she get back to work. It was paradise.

Not that I've been wasting my time here. Each day brings me one step closer to becoming the Zent. Nobody can accuse me of resting too much.

It had taken Raublut three days to lay the groundwork necessary for them to leave the villa without drawing attention to themselves. Leonzio and the Lanzenavians had gone to fetch their schtappe stones, and just a day ago, Detlinde had circled the Academy's shrines as part of the process to become the next Zent. Having to wait for Raublut's permission to leave the villa was inconvenient, but there was no helping it, since they did not have the entire Sovereign Knight's Order on their side.

But alas, not even Lord Raublut was able to keep us hidden.

Detlinde had just finished cleaning the last shrine and was eager to take her next step toward the throne when Raublut received a slew of ordonnanzes announcing that there were intruders at the Royal Academy. She and the others had needed to retreat into the forest and make their way back to the villa, where they were to wait until the Order relaxed its search.

Could the timing have been any worse?

It wasn't the first time Detlinde had needed to wait in the villa, but that didn't make it any easier; Leonzio was stuck in his room waiting for his schtappe to be absorbed, meaning she had no one to keep her entertained. She had attempted to have a tea party with her elder sister to ease her growing boredom, but her sister had refused, since she had already agreed to brew with the scholars.

She's always like this.

Alstede was an honor student and a responsible young woman who always did exactly as their mother instructed. As commendable as that sounded, it meant she would outright ignore Detlinde until she was done carrying out whatever orders she had received.

Does she not realize that my demands take precedence? I will soon be the Zent, whereas our mother will only be Aub Ehrenfest.

Nonetheless, Alstede had cast aside the proposal of a tea party with her younger sister to make rejuvenation potions and magic tools for Lords Raublut and Gervasio. Detlinde was far from

impressed.

Mother isn't even here right now...

Their mother had departed to obtain Ehrenfest's foundation. Detlinde had no idea why the woman was so obsessed with such a backwater duchy... but if obtaining what she desired would make her less unpleasant, all the better.

"Sister, that must be enough for now," Detlinde said and rose from her seat. "We would not want to miss dinner." Though she had come to the brewing room, she had not taken part; she had simply watched while one of the attendants worked on her nails.

"We have plenty of time," Alstede shot back. She made eye contact with the scholars, then returned her attention to the pot she was stirring. She really did value her brewing above a member of her own family.

Detlinde turned away and pouted. "Oh, but you cannot go to the dining hall in your brewing clothes, can you? You will need to return to your room to change. Let us not drag this out; if you insist on continuing to brew, then please make extra rejuvenation potions for me."

"For you? We are making them for *everyone*," Alstede glanced at the scholars and said, "Is that not correct?"

The scholars confirmed that they had made potions for Detlinde as well.

"No, no," Detlinde protested. "I want *extra* rejuvenation potions. Twice as many as anyone else should do. Those are *my* scholars brewing with you, remember; under normal circumstances, every single one of their potions would belong to me. The Lanzenavians are receiving some only as a result of my immense generosity. Preparing more for me should not be a problem at all."

Her eyes tinged with concern, Alstede explained that they would not be able to make those arrangements while they were following such a strict schedule. "If you desire more potions, then you really should make them yourself... But we can prepare at least two more for you before dinner."

"Oh my... That simply will not do. Having to cleanse *every* shrine was more exhausting than I can describe. To make matters worse, this is my only day of rest; I will need to resume work on obtaining the Grutrissheit tomorrow, no? As you are going to be staying here in the villa, it seems like the natural conclusion that you should make them for me."

Though her feet weren't aching—she had relied on her highbeast to take her from shrine to shrine—she had spent more time outside than she usually would. Spending her entire morning in bed had done wonders to refresh her, but that didn't mean she was in the mood to brew. She had never really cared for the task and all the tedious labor it required.

"Tomorrow?" Alstede stopped stirring her pot. "Do you have Lord Raublut's permission?"

Detlinde placed a hand on her cheek. "Not yet, but I must obtain the Grutrissheit posthaste. And you wish to return home, no? I shall ask for your sake as well; that will surely move him." She was the next Zent, so she saw no reason he would refuse.

"Lord Raublut has the entire Sovereign Knight's Order to oversee; let us wait here for him. You were spotted while circling the shrines, were you not? If you go outside without permission, I suspect you will get caught."

"Caught?!" Detlinde cried, her eyebrows raised in outrage. "I am this country's next queen! To think anyone would mistake *me* for one of the intruders... Even for you, Sister, this is unacceptably rude!"

"I suppose so..." Alstede muttered.

Detlinde sighed. How could anyone make such a basic mistake? There were times when she had to wonder whether the woman before her now really was her sister.

"Do be more careful going forward..." Detlinde eventually said. "In any case, were you not desperate to return home? If we work together as sisters and ask Lord Raublut for this one favor..."

"Of course I want to return to Ahrensbach; Benedikta must be worried about how Lord Blasius and I are faring. But we cannot put Lord Raublut at risk over a little discomfort. Mother told us to follow his instructions when it came to matters of the royal family and the Sovereignty."

Goodness... How dreadful. Even now, the most she can do is parrot Mother's orders.

Benedikta was Detlinde's niece. Any decent mother in this situation would want to rush home to her daughter, but Alstede was prioritizing Georgine's instructions. It was unfortunate, really—they could easily have resolved the situation by emphasizing the importance of obtaining the Grutrissheit or asking Gervasio to order Raublut to let them proceed.

“Sister... You are always so obsessed with what Mother thinks...”

“That reminds me—has she responded to our letter yet? She should have arrived in Ehrenfest yesterday or earlier today.”

Detlinde had sent out an update as soon as they’d arrived at the villa. In response, Georgine had ordered her not to send another for the next five days, as she was going to be busy sneaking into Ehrenfest. Alstede considered it a fair enough request—a poorly timed message would reveal where their mother was hiding—but Detlinde could not help feeling slighted. It did not help that not even her elder sister empathized with her frustration.

“Have faith, Sister; she must be dyeing Ehrenfest’s foundation as we speak,” Detlinde said. Then she sighed again. “I am trying so hard to cement Mother’s position as the next Aub Ehrenfest, but she has forbidden me from contacting her, and Lord Raublut will not allow us to leave...”

Once again, Detlinde’s complaints were directed at Raublut. Only by obtaining the Grutrissheit would she earn her mother’s pride... yet the world was insistent on getting in her way. It was dreadful.

“Lord Raublut is very busy right now,” Alstede replied in the same tone one would take with a child. “He must attend to both the villa *and* the Knight’s Order, all while dealing with the royal family.”

“Goodness me! That much is obvious!”

“Is it?” Alstede asked with a smile. “You should know, then, that we must wait for him to contact us. Brewing rejuvenation potions is an important job, in case you weren’t aware; the Lanzenavians should almost be done absorbing their schtappes, and they will need quite a lot of tutoring to get used to them.”

Something clicked in Detlinde’s mind. Considering how long it had taken her to absorb her own schtappe, Leonzio would surely be finished soon—likely by dinner or breakfast the next morning. As bored as she was, the fun times were about to return.

“Here you are,” Alstede said. “Your share of the rejuvenation potions.” She must have been brewing them during their conversation, and the sight did wonders to raise Detlinde’s spirits.

Though she refused to have tea with me, I shall forgive her. The circumstances have been tough on her as well.

Perhaps two days ago, Alstede had completed the duties

assigned to her and attempted to return to Ahrensbach only to find that the door to the Lanzenave Estate would not open. “It was like somebody locked it,” she had said. Having no other choice, she had tried to return through the Ahrensbach Dormitory... but it, too, had proved entirely inaccessible. She had asked Raublut to look into the matter, whereupon she had learned that someone had stolen their duchy’s foundation. That was the most the Sovereignty knew, so they had yet to identify the thief or receive any updates on the current status of Ahrensbach.

Ordonnanzes could not cross duchy borders, so Detlinde had sent a magic letter home in an attempt to get to the bottom of the situation. Their foundation might have been stolen, but her allies in the castle would send an explanation in short order. Or if the culprit intercepted the letter, Detlinde had assumed they would fear her status as the next Zent and immediately back away.

Contrary to these expectations, Detlinde had yet to hear from anyone, friend or foe. It was annoying—she wasn’t particularly fond of people ignoring her—but at the same time, it also motivated her to obtain the Grutrissheit no matter what.

“Stay strong...” Detlinde said. “We need only endure until the day I take the throne.”

“Hah. Indeed,” Alstede replied with a thin smile. “In any case, this seems a more appropriate time for us to leave.”

Detlinde had wanted more praise, but she was far from surprised; her sister had always been emotionally unavailable. Not once had she squealed or jumped with joy over Detlinde’s various achievements.

Leaving the cleanup to her scholars, Detlinde returned to her room with her other retainers and Alstede. The attendants opened the door for them, and they started down the raised corridor leading into the main building.

No matter how many times she saw it, Detlinde was taken aback by the villa’s strange architecture. A normal villa would comprise a large main building for the lord or lady of the house, a side building for baptized children, more side buildings for the second and third wives, and a training area for the knights. This one, however, consisted of a main building and only a single side building.

Though its strange design ended up convenient for me.

On the day of their arrival, Raublut had proposed that they all

stay together in the side building—but it was unthinkable for an unmarried man and woman in love with one another to sleep under the same roof. Heeding a passionate explanation from Detlinde, Gervasio had said that those from Ahrensbach could instead use the main building.

“That building was for Lanzenave’s princesses,” he had said. “I do not mind if you would all prefer to stay there. I will stay here, however, in the room where I was raised.”

In truth, Detlinde had wanted to stay in the side building—it contained the teleportation circle to the Lanzenave Estate, the brewing room and materials, food and servants, and the dining hall. The thought of needing to move to the main building anytime she wanted to sleep or change sounded painfully inconvenient, so she had asked the Lanzenavians to stay in the main building instead... but Gervasio had refused to budge on the matter.

“The main building is for women,” he had continued, not a trace of warmth to his voice. “If you insist on our separation, then I must ask you to sleep there. The only alternative is that you stay in the side building with the rest of us, as per the original plan. Those who wish to sleep elsewhere may do so. Nobody else takes issue with the arrangement.”

Gervasio had then taken his attendants to his room. The certainty with which he’d navigated the villa was evidence enough that he had once lived there.

Not a single person had agreed that Detlinde should get to stay in the side building. Raublut had told her to make up her mind while he gave them all a tour, then led them through the dining hall, the brewing room, and the internal training room. She had not stood a chance against the previous occupants of a villa she had never seen before, so she reluctantly agreed to stay in the main building. Had it been any smaller or less glamorous, she would most likely have continued to protest.

To think everyone would simply ignore the problem of unwed men and women sleeping in such close quarters...

Detlinde was still seething about Gervasio when the end of the corridor came into view. An attendant opened the door ahead.

“One moment, Lady Detlinde, Lady Alstede. I will now open the next door.”

To enter the main building from the raised corridor, one first had to pass through a locked door and a small room. It was most

unusual; such passages normally led into a second corridor or an entrance hall with stairs. Stranger still, the villa's main building did not have windows on the side of the connecting corridor, so anyone who spent their entire life inside would not even know it existed.

"I wonder why there are so many doors for a simple raised corridor," Detlinde mused. "It must have been terribly inconvenient for those living here on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps they wished to hide it from someone."

"Goodness, what an amusing idea..." Alstede remarked with a chuckle. "From whom would they be hiding it and why?"

The group headed upstairs to the third floor, which contained three large rooms said to have belonged to the Lanzenave princesses. The first had a koralie as its emblem; the second, a schentis; and the third, a loeweleier. The doors and windows were decorated with elaborate latticework, and the furniture was so beautiful that one could easily tell it was meant for royalty.

Detlinde, Alstede, and Blasius were currently staying in the three rooms. Blasius was displeased with the feminine decor, but not Detlinde; she was actually quite satisfied. There were chambers for retainers connected to their rooms, but any men in their service were staying on the floor below.

"Let us change and then go to dinner," Alstede said. She went into the koralie room, while Detlinde entered its loeweleier counterpart.

Once they were changed, Detlinde and Alstede returned to the side building and made their way into the dining hall. The head count had increased since lunch, and even Leonzio had made his return. He appeared to be enjoying one of many lively conversations.

"Oh, Lord Leonzio. I see you have absorbed your schtappe."

"Lady Detlinde. Only two days have passed, yet it feels like an eternity since I saw you last."

"Goodness... Were you really that eager to see me?" Detlinde's cheeks went bright red in response to the obvious compliment; Leonzio must have spent the entire two days thinking about her.

"I would be positively delighted if you could arrange for me to start learning to use my schtappe tomorrow. My mastery of such a powerful tool would surely be of great use to you."

"Indeed. Rest assured, for you shall be tutored by none other

than Yurgenschmidt's next Zent."

Lanzenavians tended to have exceptional mana capacities; they would make for lethal combatants once they knew how to wield their schtappes. There wasn't enough time for them to cover everything on the Royal Academy's curriculum, but the fundamentals of combat wouldn't take very long at all. Detlinde was convinced that even she could teach absolute beginners, and the thought of being showered with as much praise as when she had taught the Lanzenavians to create highbeasts made her feel giddy with delight.

"Incidentally..." Giordano, a Lanzenavian envoy who normally stood behind and attended to Leonzio, looked around the dining hall. "I do not see King Gervasio here."

Detlinde was inspired to look around as well. As the man's bewilderment implied, it was rare for Gervasio to be absent—especially when he fancied himself the lord of the villa.

"He is not here tonight," Raublut's head attendant interjected. "He has asked that we eat without him."

Raublut's head attendant was staying in the villa rather than his usual estate; his most important duty was maintaining a line of communication with his lord. It was common for nobles working in the castle to tell their head attendant when they intended to return home and when to prepare meals; Raublut was exploiting that to send orders and updates on the palace by ordonnanz. The head attendant's duty was to convey his charge's will to those in the villa and then return any information of considerable importance.

"King Gervasio circled the shrines with me just yesterday..." Detlinde said. "He served as a decoy for me during my retreat. Perhaps he is still weary from that."

Gervasio had gone to the library with Raublut to draw the attention of the Sovereign Knight's Order away from Detlinde. She considered it only natural that her safety as the next Zent should come first, but she still appreciated the heavy burden he had chosen to bear. His absence was accepted with great magnanimity.

"Might I ask you all to take your seats?" an attendant said.

Once everyone was seated, the attendants began serving food. It was a peaceful meal spent discussing the order in which they would cover the uses of schtappes.

"Before you can even attempt anything else," Alstede began, "you must have a set form for your schtappe that you can maintain

for a long time.”

“It is best to make a simple schtappe without any excessive decoration,” Detlinde added. “As complex as you might want yours to be, it will only make it harder to maintain.”

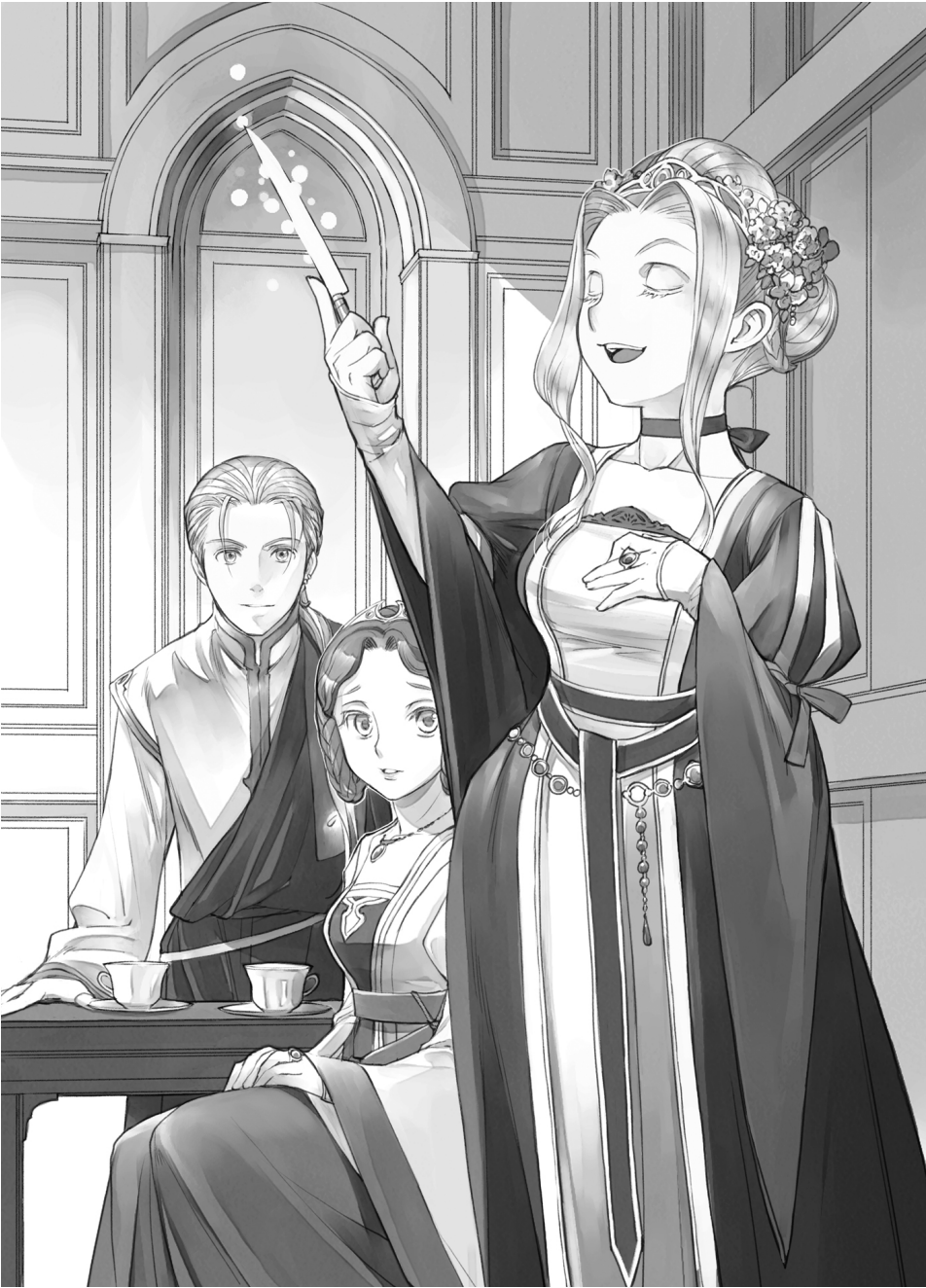
“My... Was that something one of your professors said to you?”

“Now, now, Sister—wherever would you get such an idea? I am just speaking common sense.”

Even after dinner, the Lanzenavians were eager to learn how to use their schtappes. By the time seventh bell indicated it was time for bed, they had come up with set forms and even managed to shoot mana from them.

“Now that you know how to make your schtappes, the next step is to learn the spells necessary to transform them into weapons and tools,” Blasius explained. “It shouldn’t take very long at all; by forming highbeasts and making armor, you have already demonstrated that you can control your mana.”

Detlinde looked over the Lanzenavians, who were still thirsting for knowledge, and made her schtappe with a broad smile. “To give you an example—*messer!*”



“Messer is commonly used when brewing and gathering materials,” Blasius noted.

The Lanzenavians listened intently and voiced their approval of the “outstanding” demonstration. Detlinde had spent her entire day agonizingly bored, but now she was overcome with the joy of having obtained what she truly desired.

And tomorrow is going to be even better.

Unfortunately for Detlinde, the dull yet peaceful tranquility of the villa was torn apart that very same night. Never again would she awake happy.

The Royal Academy at Night

“Kehrschluessel. Ersterde.”

Once the shimmering lights and the floating sensation were gone, I slowly opened my eyes. I'd cast the same spell that I always used to teleport between country gates, but my surroundings weren't at all what I'd expected. There were no movable roofs or stairs; we were in an empty room with fully white walls and a single door. It reminded me a little of the teleportation halls that connected duchies and their dormitories, only the outer edges of the circle and the door glowed with the same faint rainbow light as the country gates.

The glow made me wonder whether the door in front of us could only be opened with the Grutrissheit. It appeared to be made of wood, so maybe a simple key would suffice, though I couldn't tell at a glance.

“How strange... The same spell took us to an entirely new location...” Leonore mused aloud, seeming as curious as I was.

Matthias nodded in agreement. Then he turned to me and asked, “Is this truly the Royal Academy?”

I didn't have an answer for him; this was my first time coming here as well. I could guess we were somewhere on the Academy's grounds, but that was all.

Well, let's investigate.

There was a chance that our current whereabouts would impact our plans moving forward. I used the Book of Mestionora to find our exact location... and discovered we were in the Royal Academy's central building. We were farther back than where we usually went for the archduke candidate course, in an area that students were forbidden from entering.

Hmm... Ferdinand might know where we are.

I turned to ask him, only to remember that he wasn't with us. He was still in Ahrensbach with the rest of the knights.

“I shall teleport our remaining knights,” I said. “Please step off of the magic circle and wait. Do not attempt to leave the room to

investigate, and do not cause any fuss.”

I entrusted Cornelius with watching over everyone, then returned to Ferdinand with my other guard knights.

“*Kehrschluessel*. Ahrensbach.”

Once we were back in Ahrensbach, I told the remaining knights to line up on the teleportation circle. Then I whispered to Ferdinand, “This magic circle leads to a room in the Royal Academy unlike any of the gates. Do you know its location? Should we alter our plans?”

“No, there is no need. I teleported there before under... certain circumstances. But that does not matter right now. The knights appear to be ready.”

I wonder what circumstances would require someone to use the teleportation hall in a forbidden section of the Royal Academy...

Ferdinand’s past was as incomprehensible as always; I couldn’t even imagine what he must have gone through as a child and a student. I wasn’t going to complain, though. His experience had gotten me out of so many scrapes.

Relieved that there was no need to change our plans, I stood on the teleportation circle and said, “*Kehrschluessel*. Ersterde.” We arrived at the Academy in the blink of an eye, at which point Ferdinand cast his eyes over the knights.

“Do we have Verbergen’s seals?”

The scholars had rushed to make concealment charms at Leonore’s recommendation. The ones given to the knights used feystones, but mine was a magic circle drawn on fey paper.

“Let us head outside as quickly as we can,” Ferdinand said. “The last thing we want is to face more instant-death poison while we are in such close quarters.”

That much was true. The knights had fought in the Purge of Lanzenave and the Battle of Gerlach before coming here; though they were using cloth to cover their mouths, many of them didn’t have much jureve left.

“Do not speak until we are outside,” Ferdinand continued. “Rozemyne, is everything ready?”

At his signal, I pressed my Book of Mestionora against the door, which began to open with a low creak that echoed throughout the midnight Royal Academy. An eerie silence followed, and tension filled the air. Our immediate surroundings weren’t too dark thanks to the glow of the teleportation circle, but given the late hour,

everything outside the room was pitch black. The darkness was so thick that it almost felt like it was seeping through the crack in the opening door.

Ferdinand gestured ahead of us with a firm chop of his hand, spurring Eckhart and Angelica to silently leave our front line and step into the hallway. Their armor stood out a little in the darkness. I enhanced my eyesight and stared intently at their backs while praying that we wouldn't cross paths with the Sovereign Knight's Order.

Once he'd taken a quick look around, Eckhart raised a hand, indicating that there weren't any knights nearby. Angelica pressed onward in response until she reached a turn; then she shook her hand, signaling that there were people around the corner, and returned to us. This hallway contained the teleportation doors for all the villas and dormitories; of course there were Sovereign guards here.

"Is the conference building clear?" Ferdinand muttered.

Eckhart had already started advancing down the hallway. He confirmed that our second option was clear of any knights, then beckoned to Justus and quietly spoke his name. The attendant-slash-scholar approached one of the windows, intent on unlocking it.

A moment passed; then Eckhart waved again.

"Go in order and move without a sound," Ferdinand instructed.

At once, the knights filtered out of the room. I was watching them go—one of my duties was to close the door again, so I needed to be the last person to leave—when Ferdinand suddenly whispered to me.

"If you wish to take your knights and return to Ahrensbach, now is your chance."

I glared at him, unable to believe my ears. After everything we'd endured, did he really expect me to turn around and leave? Dunkelfelger had asked me to use the Grutrissheit to justify our being here. My complicated relationship with feystones meant I was even more of a burden than usual, but I could at least keep Ferdinand from having to expose his Book of Mestionora.

I eyed the teleportation circle, then shook my head and stepped out into the hallway. Ferdinand reluctantly came with me. Only once the door was locked did we regroup with the knights.

The familiar carpet beneath my feet told me we really were

inside the Royal Academy's central building. This was where one obtained the Book of Mestionora—where one could access the country gate and its teleportation circle. Though it had taken me this long to realize it, the truth was clear to me now: this really was Yurgenschmidt's holy land.

Nobody spoke; we simply advanced through the ivory building lit only by reflected moonlight. The thrill of sneaking through a school put all sorts of strange ideas in my head, like skeletons leaping out of a science classroom. My limbs were trembling in anticipation of whatever was to come, and the silence made me want to cry out.

I watched as the knights climbed through the single open window one by one and vanished into the forest on their highbeasts.

"Are you sincere in your intention to come along?" Ferdinand asked.

"Would I be here otherwise?"

"Then I must ask you not to scream."

Before I could utter another word, Ferdinand picked me up and jumped out the window. I nearly did scream but clapped a hand over my mouth in the nick of time. Ferdinand, in contrast, didn't seem the slightest bit bothered as we plummeted toward the ground. He briskly formed his highbeast, sat me in front of him, and then flew off. The knights who had disappeared among the trees came out again to follow us.

I can't believe knights do this like it's nothing. They're amazing!

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand said. "Contact Dunkelfelger."

If all was going as planned, then Dunkelfelger's knights would already be stationed in their dormitory. We had been told to contact them after using the teleporter.

"Right..." I took out some fey paper Hartmut had marked with an Ordoschnelli magic circle and spoke into it. "Aub Dunkelfelger, this is Rozemyne. We have left the central building."

Considering where we just were... and the fact that I can see the library over there... my target must be...

I used my stylo to write "Dunkelfelger's common room" as the destination of my letter, then folded the sheet into an airplane and threw it toward the Dunkelfelger Dormitory. Its ivory hue tore through the night sky like a shooting star.

We were currently headed to the Ahrensbach Dormitory.

Dunkelfelger's knights would meet us there once they received word of our arrival. There wouldn't be anyone inside, since the intruders were staying in the Adalgisa villa, and its location made it a much safer place to congregate than Dunkelfelger's dormitory or the central building. Together, we would search for the Adalgisa villa, which was being kept hidden by Verbergen the God of Concealment.

"Are you really okay with going to the villa?" I asked Ferdinand. "If you think it might make you unwell, we can get someone else to lead the attack." Everything I'd learned about the villa told me it wasn't somewhere he'd want to return to, and it seemed unnecessarily cruel to make him relive what must have been deeply unpleasant memories.

Ferdinand heaved a heavy sigh. "You have suppressed your intense hatred of war to come here as an aub. Do you really expect me to run away? I would advise you not to fret about things that are best left alone, but I will say this: I relish the opportunity to tear that villa to pieces."

"Hold it right there. What's gotten into you lately? You keep saying all these violent and outlandish things, like when you proposed burning Ahrensbach to the ground and expressed your dismay that the royals and the Lanzenavians hadn't wiped each other out." He hadn't rested much since his rescue, so maybe his exhaustion was getting to him.

"My thoughts have always been violent," Ferdinand said with a wry smile. "I simply never went out of my way to voice them. You may rest assured that this is anything but a recent development."

"How is *that* supposed to reassure me?!"

"Then believe whatever puts your mind at ease."

Are you seriously acting like this doesn't concern you?! These are your thoughts!

Ferdinand was far more violent than I'd previously assumed. Rather than avoid the Adalgisa villa out of discomfort, he wanted to utterly destroy it. His stony expression when speaking about Gervasio had worried me, but I could see that he was fully resolved to face his past.

"Speaking of which..." I said, "do you know where the villa might be? On the map, it was below and to the right of the Ahrensbach Dormitory... but it's so dark out that even the dormitory seems invisible."

By looking at the central and specialty buildings, I'd managed to get a rough idea of where we were, but our surroundings were a mess of darkness interrupted only by the dull shadows of the dormitories and the glowing cylinders that marked their gathering spots. I couldn't even tell if we were headed in the general direction of the Ahrensbach Dormitory.

"If you failed to understand the map so spectacularly that even the Ahrensbach Dormitory is too hard to find, why did you assure Aub Dunkelfelger that you knew where the villa was?"

"Because I do—at least to some degree. I've just realized that the map and the territory aren't one and the same, so I'm having trouble getting my bearings. It was down and to the right on the map... so we should go southeast, right?"

"Do you even know where southeast is? How can you be in such a sorry state when you wield the Grutrissheit and decided to lead this excursion?"

Ferdinand wasn't impressed with my map-reading skills, but that wasn't an issue—not when I could thrust the task onto someone else. "I do not need to know where southeast is when you are here to tell me. You located the Royal Academy's shrines when investigating its twenty mysteries, did you not? The details were in Professor Hirschur's documents. You could tell me their location even without a Grutrissheit."

I must have won our little debate because Ferdinand grimaced and told me to face forward. I did as instructed with a victorious grin, and that was when I noticed the magic circle in the sky above. Even at night, it was easy to see.

The Ahrensbach Dormitory had at some point appeared in the distance. I could tell it was Ahrensbach's because Dunkelfelger's knights had taken up the space above it. They exuded such an immense amount of pressure that even birds and small animals in the forest retreated in fear of what they must have assumed to be mana-rich predators.

"I suppose it was unreasonable of us to expect some discretion..." Ferdinand muttered.

"Well, we *are* using Verbergen's seal. I suppose it wouldn't be fair to compare them to us. Not to mention, they're loudmouthed—um, *imposing*—by nature. Ohoho..."

I tried to cover my slip of the tongue with an innocent laugh, but it was an awkward attempt at best. I was relieved, then, when

an ordonnanz arrived to spare me any further embarrassment. It landed on my arm and spoke.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Dunkelfelger. We have arrived above the Ahrensbach Dormitory. Where are your knights?”

The ordonnanz was partway through its second repetition when Ferdinand grabbed it and told me to look away. He sent a response while I stared into the distance.

“This is Ferdinand. We are using Verbergen’s seal, which has made us invisible to you, but we can see your forces. We shall rendezvous with you shortly.”

I watched the ivory bird soar through the night sky to deliver its message. Barely a moment later, our allies started to circle the dormitory. Were they searching for us?

They’re kinda like bees.

Indeed, rather than simply waiting for us, they were swarming like bees desperate to inform their fellows of an especially lovely flower.

“I see... Heisshitze is not the only one incapable of remaining still...” Ferdinand remarked, clearly exasperated. “Is this just part of their culture? Now that they are drawing so much attention to themselves, our attempts to be stealthy seem like a rather pointless endeavor.”

We had worn Verbergen’s seal so that we wouldn’t need to fight the Sovereign knights in the central building. Now that we were outside, however, it made sense to remove them; we didn’t want to risk Dunkelfelger hitting us by mistake.

Ferdinand stopped using his seal and then took his highbeast ahead of our front line. “Troops, remove your Verbergen seals!” he ordered.

Everyone did as they were told, and our allies roared in excitement when they saw us appear out of thin air. “They were right under our noses!” one cried. “I would never have noticed them!”

“Lord Ferdinand, where is the villa?” another asked. “Let us hurry there at once.”

“Heisshitze?” Ferdinand replied. “Why are you here? I see you came with more troops than we agreed upon...”

I was sure I’d recognized one of the voices, and now I knew why—Heisshitze had decided to join the fray. So much for my assumption that he would sit this one out after fighting in

Ahrensbach and Gerlach. Maybe he hadn't taken no for an answer.

"Lady Rozemyne, if you would guide us to the villa..." said Aub Dunkelfelger. As it turned out, he was leading his duchy's troops. I went to greet him, but he raised a hand to stop me. "Traditional greetings are not necessary on the battlefield. I must ask that we make haste."

The aub's voice was bright, and... Yeah, he wasn't even trying to hide his excitement. I turned to Ferdinand, convinced that one of us needed to say something to curb our allies' enthusiasm. Otherwise, they would descend upon the villa the moment it came into view.

Ferdinand met my eye and took the matter into his own hands: "We will now move to the villa's location and use magic circles of Anhaltung the Goddess of Advice to expose Verbergen's concealment. Only once we have checked whether the villa's barrier is active will we infiltrate it. Attempt to capture as many of the traitors as possible."

Ahrensbach's mana burden moving forward would depend on the number of criminals who survived this encounter. In other words, we needed these traitors to be held responsible for their crimes and imprisoned so that we could wring them for all they were worth.

"To elaborate," Ferdinand continued, "we know that Detlinde, Alstede, and Leonzio are three orchestrators of this plot. Do not kill them unless it is absolutely necessary. Moreover, as they have antidotes and ways to counter instant-death poison, we should expect them to use it without hesitation. Are you prepared to deal with this?"

"Of course," Aub Dunkelfelger replied. "We've used the intelligence from Hannelore's sortie to make sure we're ready."

"Now, allow me to share what we know of the enemy. Detlinde and her entourage comprise roughly ten people, whereas Alstede and her husband brought only their attendants. There were twelve Lanzenavian envoys who greeted me, eight of whom wore feystone rings. These figures do not account for Gervasio, the king of Lanzenave."

The king's presence meant we could expect any number of retainers—that much was true in both Lanzenave and Yurgenschmidt. Leonzio was a Lanzenavian royal as well, Ferdinand explained, and would therefore be acting with several servants of

his own. We had no idea how many Lanzenavians had come to Yurgenschmidt on Gervasio's ship and relocated to the villa; Ferdinand had been poisoned at the time, and Letizia had been imprisoned.

"As it stands, we do not know precisely how many Lanzenavians are in the villa, but we know whom to expect: Ahrensbach's former archducal family with their retainers, and Lanzenave's royal family with theirs. There is a good chance they will be strong enough to escape bands of light made by the majority of our knights."

"Worthy opponents, then. Excellent!" Aub Dunkelfelger boomed. He sounded very satisfied with this development, but I didn't want to fight anyone powerful. In an ideal world, we would apprehend the intruders and then immediately tie them up.

"Rozemyne, form your Grutrissheit and make a show of pointing it over there," Ferdinand whispered from behind me.

I shouted, "*Grutrissheit!*" and pointed my shining Book of Mestionora in the indicated direction. I wasn't sure how, but Ferdinand must have decided that was southeast. "The villa we seek is this way!" I announced. "Let us go!"

"HRAAAAAHHH!" the knights roared, sounding especially eager as Ferdinand took the lead.

The Adalgisa Villa

Ferdinand glanced around atop his highbeast, then slowed to a stop. We were above an expanse of trees as dark and empty as the rest.

“We have reached its rough location, Rozemyne. Use the—”

“I know. You can count on me.”

I pulled out the sheet marked with Anhaltung’s magic circle that Hartmut and Clarissa had made for me, then formed my schtappe and poured mana into it. “O Anhaltung the Goddess of Advice, subordinate to the Goddess of Light—reveal what has been hidden by Verbergen the God of Concealment.”

Light rose from the magic circle, brightening the forest around us, before concentrating on one spot in particular. An elegant ivory villa appeared among the trees. Its architecture stood out in comparison to that of the Ehrenfest Dormitory—the entire villa comprised two look-alike buildings and the raised corridor that connected them. I could also see remnants of a front garden, a fountain, a pond, and some flower beds, but they were all severely overgrown. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how long had passed since they were last tended to.

The villa must have been a sight to behold when it was in use. It was so much more impressive than the dormitories, which were used only during the winter and the Archduke Conference. There was no reason to give them fountains or flower beds; doing so would require nobles and servants to stay at the Academy all year round to maintain them.

So this is where Ferdinand grew up...

I shot a quick glance behind me. His eyes carried not a trace of nostalgia. Instead, he looked openly annoyed, like he really was ready to tear the place apart.

“So there is a villa here!”

“That’s where the foreigners are!”

The knights cried out in awe when they saw an entire villa appear out of nowhere. Aub Dunkelfelger got straight to barking

orders at them.

“Find out whether the barrier’s active!”

One of Dunkelfelger’s knights—who was using a drivable highbeast, to my surprise—tossed a shining blue *something* through his open window. I watched it closely as it arced toward the ground and saw what appeared to be a glowing blue highbeast with a *glowing blue child* atop it. Before I could even think about rubbing my eyes, it started circling around.

“Huh...? It’s moving on its own.”

“Not on its own—with mana,” Ferdinand explained. “That appears to be a gewinnen piece, though its size is quite simply ridiculous.”

Gewinnen... That was the board game where you moved pieces with your mana. Memories of using the game to help Angelica understand her written lessons for the knight course came to mind; then it suddenly occurred to me what I was looking at.

“Isn’t that one of the decorative gewinnen pieces from Dunkelfelger’s tea party room? It brings to mind one of the twenty mysteries of the Royal Academy—the gewinnen pieces that challenge people to ditter, I think.”

“They are not just similar—they are one and the same. The event responsible for that legend happened not too long ago.”

I stared at him in surprise. “Hannelore didn’t know anything about it, though.”

“How could she? It happened before she was a student, and everyone involved was sworn to silence.”

“I have no further questions.”

The blue gewinnen piece—which was about as large as a recently baptized child—flashed with white light before shooting toward the villa. It smashed through a window with a resounding *crash*.

“There’s no barrier! ATTACK!” Aub Dunkelfelger roared. “I will strike from above! Heisshitze, strike from below!”

“Understood!”

The assault on the villa began with Aub Dunkelfelger’s charge. He must have thought it best to start with the closest point of entry, for he landed on a third-floor balcony, completely destroyed its sliding door, and then rushed inside. His troops followed suit with equal enthusiasm; half smashed through windows on the same story as the aub while the others crashed through balconies on the floor

below.

“Commanders shouldn’t be rushing headlong into danger, should they?” I asked. My impression of aubs was that they stood regally in the background while their troops fought for them, but that wasn’t at all what I’d just witnessed.

“Why did he not leave anyone outside to watch the villa? Did he just assume we would do it...?” Ferdinand muttered with a grimace, then turned. “Strahl, take the first squad and investigate the Sovereign Knight’s Order. I wish to know why they have not reacted to any of the noise we have made.”

“Yes, sir!”

“We cannot allow Dunkelfelger to take all the glory, so let us strike the other building. Second through seventh squads, enter through the second-floor balconies! Focus your attack on the women’s rooms on the third floor! Gather your prisoners in the front garden!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Eighth squad, watch over the prisoners. You are the only ones who will be able to recognize Leonzio of Lanzenave.”

“Yes, *sir!*”

If the second through seventh squads were targeting the third floor, why were they being ordered to breach the second? I was about to ask, but then I realized that the third floor didn’t have any balconies. The windows had wonderful decorations of plants and animals, but each was covered with sturdy-looking bars.

“The two buildings are so similar, but this one doesn’t have any balconies on its third floor,” I mused aloud. “Why is that?”

“Because of their intended residents,” Ferdinand replied. “Do you think new members of the royal branch family would live under the same roof as those destined never to be registered as Yurgenschmidt nobles?”

Ferdinand went on to explain that the side building had traditionally been overseen by the husband and wife of a branch family. The future king of Lanzenave would be registered as their child, as would the girls to be raised as Yurgenschmidt princesses. The Lanzenave princesses and their children, destined to become feystones, would spend their entire lives in the other building. The bars indicated that neither escape nor infiltration were permitted and represented the stark reality of how those who lived in the main building were treated.

"I suddenly understand your desire to reduce this villa to rubble..."

"If only we could use your estate-destroying highbeast to accelerate the process. I suspect that creature of yours would complete the job in the blink of an eye."

I spun around to look at Ferdinand, not best pleased about his teasing remark. "Don't act like my Lessy is a creature of untold destruction! The damage done to Gerlach's estate was the result of a series of very unfortunate coincidences! Nothing more!"

My tormentor chuckled—and at that moment, our first prisoner was thrown out of a window, bound with light. "This reminds me of when Matthias was flung out of the estate..." Ferdinand muttered as he brought his highbeast to the ground.

Our retainers landed as well.

"Stay here, Rozemyne," Ferdinand said. "I will give further orders from within."

"Ferdinand, I—"

"You will only be a burden on foot. Stay here with the others and watch the prisoners. If any of them escape their restraints, bind them anew. You have more mana than any of the knights."

I was basically dead weight now that I couldn't make my highbeast, yet Ferdinand had still managed to find a purpose for me. He started giving instructions to my guard knights as well.

"Clarissa, instruct Dunkelfelger to bring their prisoners out here."

"At once!"

"Knights, protect Rozemyne. Do not let any harm come to her."

"Sir!"

Ferdinand then headed into the villa with Eckhart and Justus. The relevant squads followed after them. I stood in the garden and watched them go.

Clarissa sent out an ordonnanz. A short while later, some of Dunkelfelger's knights arrived with more prisoners: three in total, all tied up with light. They must not have expected an attack at this hour, as they were still wearing their nightclothes. Even if the light of the magic circle and the gewinnen piece's loud entrance had alerted them to our presence, they wouldn't have had time to get changed.

"It would seem the building Dunkelfelger chose contains more people from Lanzenave than from Ahrensbach," one of the latter

duchy's knights observed while peering down at the newly arrived prisoners. All three of them were Lanzenavian envoys who had apparently been present when Leonzio had given his formal greeting. They looked up at us in complete silence, not even attempting to speak.

"Here come more of them," someone said and pointed up at the sky.

I gazed up at the prisoners being brought over just in time to see one of them tear apart the bands of light restraining him and attempt to flee from Dunkelfelger's knights. He must have had more mana than whoever had caught him.

"That's Leonzio!" one of the Ahrensbach knights next to me shouted, spurring five of the eighth squad's ten knights to fly up into the air to help with his recapture.

"Do not stand in my way!" Leonzio roared. "I *will* become the next king of Lanzenave!" He made a highbeast and immediately started brandishing a schtappe.

Wait, what? Why does he have a schtappe? Leonzio is an envoy, not someone raised to be Lanzenave's next king... Right?

Lanzenavians weren't given schtappes; only those registered as Yurgenschmidt nobles could obtain them. That was why Lanzenave sent princesses to the Adalgisa villa in the first place and why their next king came of age here in Yurgenschmidt. I also knew from Ferdinand that the last king to be raised in the villa was a man called Gervasio. He was old enough to have left for Lanzenave before Ferdinand was born, so I didn't have a clue what Leonzio was on about.

Seriously—how on earth does he have a schtappe?

We'd expected our foes to use instant-death poison and silver equipment, not this. I couldn't help but frown at the unexpected development, at which point our three previously docile prisoners broke free from their own bonds and leapt to their feet. They had schtappes as well, and they wasted no time shooting mana from them as they raced straight toward us. They were employing the same attack that Count Bindewald had used against me in the temple.

"Rozemyne!" Cornelius barked.

At once, I turned my schtappe into a protective shield. These attacks were a *lot* stronger than anything Count Bindewald had thrown at me, but I wasn't the least bit concerned; compared to all

the other attempts made on my life, these mana blobs were straightforward and easy to defend against. Not to mention, I was surrounded by knights.

Leonore and Laurenz formed their own shields in short order. Angelica, Matthias, and Cornelius all sprang forward and swung their swords down, cleaving the mana blobs and scattering their remains.

Well, that was no surprise.

Way back when, I hadn't known the first thing about combat, and Damuel's mana capacity had paled in comparison to that of Count Bindewald. But even then, we'd managed to defend ourselves against his attacks. Only the most arrogant combatants would use balls of raw mana in a battle such as this. The insinuation that one's opponents would succumb to such a basic attack was well and truly insulting.

As much as mana blobs *could* play a minor role during ambushes, they were completely useless otherwise; no Yurgenschmidt noble would even consider using them. These Lanzenavians must not have known how to use their schtappes properly.

"Ngh!"

The prisoners grimaced in frustration and attempted to attack again—but by that point, Angelica had already closed in on them with Stenluke. Her enhanced speed really was something.

"Make sure not to kill them!" Leonore shouted admonishingly as she spread out her cape to block my vision. Her warning must have come too late, however, as what followed was an anxious cry from Angelica.

"Someone! Come heal this person! Quickly!"

"Angelica! Trade places with me!" Cornelius replied. He had an aptitude for Water, meaning he could cast healing spells to at least some degree.

Leonore waited until our injured opponent had been tended to; then she put her cape down and allowed me to see again. Cornelius had used just enough healing to keep the prisoner alive before tying him up and pushing him in our direction.

"Hartmut! We need schtappe-sealing bracelets on this one!" he shouted.

Hartmut rushed over and did as instructed.

That was one foe dealt with. The remaining two were shooting

out huge orbs of mana and seemed to be more capable fighters, but they had no other attacks, and they weren't anywhere near as well trained as the knights. They didn't even have silver equipment or instant-death poison to rely on, maybe because we'd taken them by surprise or because Dunkelfelger had already disarmed them.

It wasn't long before Matthias and Angelica took down the last of the prisoners. They broke our captives' legs to prevent another attempted escape and then bound them.

"Clarissa, send an ordonnanz to Dunkelfelger," Leonore instructed. "Tell them our opponents have schtappes—though I am sure they already know as much..."

I turned my attention to the building our allied knights had disappeared into and glimpsed the dazzling flashes of a mana battle through its blown-out windows. Even from outside, I was able to hear Aub Dunkelfelger's exhilarated roar: "Don't think your feeble shields will protect you from *my* attacks!"

Dunkelfelger's knights brought us more and more prisoners. Leonore explained that those bound with light had schtappes and an abundance of mana—in stark contrast to the manaless Lanzenave troops who had ravaged Ahrensbach—and would need to be watched even more carefully. In response, the knights shackled the new prisoners with schtappe-sealing bracelets, broke their legs, and then tied them up with rope.

Leonore kept her shield raised and watched with narrowed eyes as our crippled opponents groaned in pain. "They clearly have *some* training... They bode their time while pretending to be captured, then acted in unison the moment our forces were divided. So why were they fighting so ineptly? They had enough mana to break the knights' bindings. They could have done so much more..."

I gazed upon the man who had shouted about becoming the next king of Lanzenave. Leonzio, was it? Like his peers, he was fighting us in his nightwear, his hair still a disheveled mess. Well, it was generous to call it fighting—he was continuously attempting to run away while our knights blocked his every means of escape.

Leonzio's approach seemed no better than his allies'—he was shooting raw mana from his schtappe while attempting to flee on his highbeast. He moved fast, likely a reflection of his immense mana capacity... but escaping an encirclement of seven knights wouldn't be easy. Even from a distance, I could see that it was only a matter of time. He would surely be captured soon.

“Perhaps they are simply inexperienced,” I said. “It can’t have been too many days ago that they obtained their schtappes.”

They had experience using highbeasts and could shoot mana, but transforming their schtappes into weapons and using rott were still too much for them. In a sense, they were like me before I’d started attending the Royal Academy. Back then, I’d practiced using my highbeast to gather materials and shot mana from my ring or granted prayers, but I’d not used a schtappe before my classes.

“So they obtained their schtappes just recently...?” Leonore asked.

“Indeed. Assuming they really are in cahoots with the Sovereign Knight’s Order, they should have requested aid the moment we launched our attack. There’s no other explanation for why they haven’t used rott, the first spell one learns at the Royal Academy.”

Leonore nodded, convinced.

Laurenz kept his shield raised and a stern look on his face as he slipped into our conversation. “If this guy wants to be the king of Lanzenave, then whatever. Power to him. But why is he here in Yurgenschmidt—and at the Royal Academy, of all places? I don’t see why Lanzenavians would want schtappes, the symbol of our country’s nobles.”

“Maybe obtaining a schtappe is necessary to become Lanzenave’s king...” Leonore mused aloud, likewise confused. “But plenty of our foes now have them. Could there really be so many claimants to the throne?”

We didn’t know enough about Lanzenave to draw any reliable conclusions. Foreign politics and the Adalgisa villa weren’t part of the Royal Academy’s curriculum, and our only reason for being here was to capture the Lanzenavians who had abetted Ahrensbach’s previous archducal family’s treason. I certainly hadn’t told *my* retainers what I already knew about the Adalgisa villa.

“Rather than continue to speculate, we should just ask the prisoners,” I said and pointed at Leonzio, who had now been caught through the combined efforts of Dunkelfelger’s and Ahrensbach’s knights.

Barely a moment later, a tremendous explosion resounded from the third floor of the building Ferdinand and the others had entered. I recoiled, and tension spread through us all as we turned to see the cause of the commotion. Every single window had shattered, showering the ivory footway below with chunks of glass

that practically disintegrated on impact.

“Lord Ferdinand! What is the meaning of this?!” came Detlinde’s shrill cry. She was so loud that not even all the noise could drown her out.

I’d secretly hoped that someone else would capture Detlinde; Ferdinand was stuck in such a violent mindset that I worried she might not survive an encounter with him. However, my concerns for her vanished when she continued to speak.

“You may be so desperate for my love that you escaped the jaws of death to find me, but nonetheless! Barging into a lady’s room in the dead of night is unthinkable boorish and cr—”

Detlinde’s furious, hysteric cries were abruptly cut short. Someone had decided to silence her—that much was uncomfortably obvious.

“She took that tone with *Ferdinand*...?” Cornelius muttered. “I hope Eckhart didn’t just go berserk...” He was worried that his brother might violate our command not to kill any of the orchestrators, and it was easy to see why—Detlinde had made those insulting remarks to the very man she’d poisoned. Had it been me up there with them, not Eckhart, *I* would probably have gone berserk.

“Ferdinand would have intervened,” I said. “And even if not, he knows how to cast healing spells. Lady Detlinde must be alive.” I sincerely doubted that Ferdinand would allow anyone to contravene an order he had given. His excessively logical approach to everything did wonders to put me at ease.

Ahrensbach’s knights soon arrived with a fresh batch of prisoners. Justus was dragging along an unconscious Detlinde wrapped in bands of light. Her nightwear was covered in dirt, and mud clung to her gorgeous blonde tresses. It was scandalous for an adult woman to have her hair down in public; she would probably throw a fit when she woke up.

“Justus... She is... *alive*, right?”

“Eckhart’s blow only knocked her unconscious,” he replied. “As much as it pains me to say it, our future plans require that we keep her alive. Her head did strike a few rocks while I was bringing her here, but I see no reason to fret about it; she has nothing between her ears to begin with.”

Justus wore a broad smile, but his brown eyes contained nothing but hatred as he glared down at Detlinde. He wasn’t even

attempting to hide his disdain—and the same went for the knights who had arrived with him. That much was to be expected; Detlinde’s foolish actions were the reason countless Ahrensbach nobles had died and the entire duchy was now considered a land of traitors.

“Are the nobles here from Ahrensbach?” I asked as more and more prisoners arrived. It was a necessary question, as I couldn’t distinguish the Lanzenavians from the people of Ahrensbach.

“Yes, Lady Rozemyne,” one of the knights replied. “These are Lady Detlinde’s retainers.”

As per the report we’d received, Detlinde had at least ten retainers with her. Perhaps there were more who had yet to be brought out, but the ones currently bound in front of me looked as though they had no idea how they had ended up in this predicament. Gags prevented them from speaking out in protest; the most they could do was stare hatefully at the Ahrensbach knights who had captured them.

The only one of the bound retainers I recognized was Martina. I must have grown too much for her to immediately recognize me in turn—she had to squint at me for a bit before her eyes widened in surprise.

Aaanyway... Looks like the two groups were staying in separate buildings.

Every single one of the nobles taken from the building Ferdinand attacked was from Ahrensbach. My attention strayed to a woman sprawled out next to Detlinde—her hair was the same indigo hue as Georgine’s and Sylvester’s, and she shared their dark-green eyes. She must have been on edge because she was frantically looking all over the place.

Soon enough, a red-haired man joined our gathering of prisoners. He seemed unusually arrogant for someone who was bound; his purple eyes were firmly locked on us.

“Lady Rozemyne, these are Lady Alstede and Lord Blasius.”

Ooh, these two.

Alstede was Georgine’s first daughter and Detlinde’s elder sister. Blasius was her husband. As I recalled, he and his brother had been demoted to the rank of archnoble in the aftermath of the civil war when their mother, the second wife, was executed.

“The building has been subjugated,” Ferdinand announced upon his return. “How fare things on Dunkelfelger’s side?”

Laurenz sent an ordonnanz to confirm, and a response arrived almost at once: “We have subjugated our building as well. Every hostile of note has been captured. We are currently checking for any hidden doors or passageways.”

“Every hostile of note?” Ferdinand repeated. His eyes betrayed surprise as he gazed upon our prisoners, seemingly looking for someone in particular.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“I do not see Gervasio.”

“Hmm?”

“The Lanzenavians here are all so young. I recognize most of them from the envoys’ formal greeting... but Gervasio is not among them.”

Gervasio had set out for Lanzenave before Ferdinand was born, meaning he must have been in his forties by now. I started to look around, and indeed, there was nobody that old among our prisoners. It was strange, especially considering that his retainers would probably be about the same age.

Ferdinand removed Alstede’s gag and said, “Where is Gervasio?”

Alstede didn’t answer the question; instead, she stared at Ferdinand with all the grace of a startled deer and then screamed, “How are you still alive?! And why are Ahrensbach knights pointing their blades at me?! To what end have Dunkelfelger’s troops been—GUH?!”

Eckhart had thrust a foot into Alstede’s back. She crumbled under the force of the blow, then coughed and spluttered, having been taken entirely by surprise. He glared at her with eyes full of malice and said, “You are in no position to ask questions. *Answer him.*”

Alstede recoiled in the face of such unexpected violence. As an archnoble through marriage, and one who had been raised as an archduke candidate, I suspected she had never been exposed to an attack like this before. Only when Eckhart grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head up did she tearfully shout, “I do not know! We stayed in a separate building from the Lanzenavians. I do not know how Lord Gervasio spends his nights!”

The woman’s shrieks rang out. She was shaking her head desperately enough that I was convinced she was telling the truth. We weren’t sure how much the people of Ahrensbach had been told

about Lanzenave's plans, and we wouldn't gain anything from torturing someone who was completely in the dark. I opened my mouth to say that we should stop pressing her, but Ferdinand raised a hand to silence me and stepped forward.

"You speak like you are a victim in all this, which makes no sense to me. Detlinde was chosen to become the next Aub Ahrensbach, so why did *you* dye the foundation in her place? Could you not have used your newly acquired authority to stop her tyranny? And why did you bring the Lanzenavians here to the Royal Academy? You have reduced your duchy's fate to that of a traitor working with foreign elements."

"M-Mother ordered me to, a-and..." Alstede's face grew paler by the second, but her excuses elicited only a cold sneer from Ferdinand.

"As the archduchess, you registered the Lanzenavians as Ahrensbach nobles, allowed them to use the teleporter in the Lanzenave Estate, opened the Farthest Hall, and foolishly enabled them to obtain schtappes. You cannot pretend to be oblivious to the severity of your crimes."

"M-Mother is always right. And it was not like I acted alone. A m-member of the royal family opened the Farthest Hall to the Lanzenavians."

Ferdinand merely frowned, but the knights were quick to voice their outrage. They had captured a former member of Ahrensbach's archducal family for the crime of treason, only to hear that the royal family was complicit in the whole ordeal.

"The Zent had yet to recognize me as the new archduchess, so I could not open the door to the Farthest Hall," Alstede continued. "I requested the assistance of the Sovereign knight commander, who managed to secure us help from the royal family."

Even the royals are cooperating with Lanzenave?! The heck is going on here?!

Collaborator

We'd already known that the Sovereign knight commander was a threat, but I'd never suspected that the royal family might be working with him. Just how many traitors were there? A stir ran through us all as Alstede continued to spin her slanted tale.

"I-Indeed, the royal family is involved. They know about everything we are doing. D-Do not be surprised if *you* are the ones deemed guilty of treason! You t-trespassed on the Royal Academy's grounds and attacked an important villa!"

Even while she protested, Alstede was trembling and desperately fighting back tears. Her husband, on the other hand, seemed especially cocksure; he sneered through the gag in his mouth and shot Ferdinand a ridiculing look.

Ferdinand responded with an even deeper frown, and the Ahrensbach knights continued to mutter among themselves. We had prepared countermeasures for our foes' instant-death poison, and our overwhelming advantage in numbers had convinced us that our victory was inevitable... but now the atmosphere was deeply uncomfortable.

Before I could dwell any longer, an ordonnanz from Aub Dunkelfelger arrived. "Members of the Sovereign Knight's Order have begun fighting each other at the royal palace," it said. "My duchy has been summoned to deal with the matter, and that is what we shall do!"

The ordonnanz started delivering its message a third time. In the background, I saw highbeasts stream out of the villa's other building and take to the sky. Their speed and coordination were a sight to behold, but that didn't change the fact they were abandoning us. Ferdinand twitched, then made a new bird without even waiting for the aub's to finish speaking.

"I must request an update on the situation before you depart for the palace. If you lack the time, leave us a single squad to report in your stead and act as our go-between."

I could sense exactly what Ferdinand was trying to say: "Do not

leave us high and dry when our battle is far from over.” The ordonnanz took flight—and a few short moments later, a group of the knights headed to the palace stopped in their tracks and returned to the villa.

“Justus, Squad Two, Squad Three—stay here and question the Ahrensbach prisoners,” Ferdinand instructed. “Hartmut, Squad Four, and Squad Five are to question the Lanzenavians. I want to know exactly what they have done since they arrived and where Gervasio might be. Be quick, for time is of the essence.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ferdinand waved a hand through the air, spurring the knights to begin moving the prisoners. Then he turned away to look at those who had yet to receive orders. “Squad Six, take Alstede to that building over there and keep a close eye on her. Squads Seven and Eight, resume Dunkelfelger’s investigation. Squads Nine and Ten, continue to search this building. Rozemyne, assemble your guard knights and come with me.”

From there, Ferdinand gestured me onto his white lion and prepared to follow the squad transporting Alstede. Her screams rang out as one of the knights threw her over his highbeast. I couldn’t help but sympathize with her; she was about to have a thoroughly unpleasant journey.

“Ferdinand, why did you order for *Alstede* to be taken away?” I asked as we took flight. “She sounds so terrified that I actually feel sorry for her.”

“She is used to obeying her superiors, making her our most likely source of valuable information. Isolating her from her allies should encourage her to speak. Furthermore, as she was the true aub acting behind the scenes, she is bound to know at least as much as Detlinde. It made the most sense to prioritize her above her compatriots; Detlinde would not be able to converse with us in her current state, and anyone could see that Blasius had resolved not to cooperate.”

Well, okay then. It’s kind of scary how logical that sounds.

“To be honest,” Ferdinand continued, “Alstede caused this mess. Had she not opened the border gate, Lanzenave’s ships would never have made it into Yurgenschmidt proper. She welcomed chaos across our border, brought about the deaths of countless nobles, and traumatized the young Letizia. Having her dangle in the air for a short while does not even begin to make up for all the sins

she has committed. Alstede obeyed orders from Detlinde and Georgine despite knowing how foolish and outright dangerous they were. I see no reason she would not cave to our demands.”

Good thing he’s on our team... Yet another reminder that I should never get on his bad side.

Alstede was soon thrown onto one of the villa’s balconies. She stared up at Ferdinand with wide, terror-stricken eyes, unable to answer his questions; her teeth were chattering too violently for any words to come out.

“Hmm. Perhaps we should consult with Dunkelfelger...” Ferdinand mused. Having entrusted Alstede to the sixth squad, he beckoned over the knights now standing with us on the balcony—Heisshitze and nine others. “Was it really wise of your aub to abandon our operation?”

Heisshitze responded with absolute certainty: “Our greatest priority is safeguarding the royal family and the Royal Academy. How else were we to react to an appeal directly from the Zent?” I could see where he was coming from, but still—it was problematic that his fellow knights had abandoned us halfway through the mission.

As we made our way into the villa, Ferdinand inquired as to how far Heisshitze’s investigation had progressed. Then he instructed the seventh and eighth squads, both comprising Ahrensbach knights, to start with the basement when they scoured the building.

“That reminds me,” Heisshitze said. “We found all sorts of strange devices in the rooms we searched. Let me show you where we put them.”

We were taken to a room containing various tools I’d never seen before. There were silver tubes among them, but the rest were completely foreign to me. Ferdinand warned me not to touch anything as I curiously wandered around; he suspected that they all contained instant-death poison.

“We shall move this all to the scholar building at a later date,” Ferdinand said. “I would receive all manner of criticisms if we took Lanzenave’s belongings back to Ahrensbach and monopolized them.”

I thought it strange that Ferdinand, of all people, would surrender an opportunity to research so many new technologies. But then I caught him muttering something about using the tools to

bait other duchies to his side. I wanted to believe my ears were playing tricks on me, but then he stated his intentions more clearly.

“I wish to use them for political bargaining.”

Am I... actually wishing he'd act more like a mad scientist? I never thought the day would come...

I clasped my hands and dedicated a moment of silence to those whom Ferdinand would drag into his “political bargaining.” Then I continued through the villa with him.

As we traversed the building's many hallways, a single thought ran through my mind: the interior decoration was flawless. To my knowledge, more than a decade had passed since the villa was closed and its occupants executed, but the furniture and such were still perfectly clean. It was strange that the Zent had maintained the place even after deciding to turn away future Lanzenave princesses.

“It looks like this villa was refurbished to host new residents...” I said. “I wonder who took care of that.”

“It matters not; there are greater concerns to be addressed,” Ferdinand replied. He doled out instructions to the knights who had arrived to give updates, then turned to look at Heissshitze. “Aub Dunkelfelger said painfully little in his ordonnanz. What in the world happened at the royal palace?”

Heissshitze stood to attention before starting his report. “Rauffen contacted one of our Sovereign knights stationed in the royal palace. During a change of the royal guard, some of the knights suddenly began attacking the others. It came entirely out of the blue, and it was impossible to distinguish friend from foe. The situation immediately descended into chaos.”

The Zent had apparently been evacuated to a hidden room of sorts that used mana to isolate him from the outside world. Everywhere else, knights of the Sovereign Order were killing each other.

“I see,” Ferdinand replied. “They need clearly distinguishable allies, so of course they would summon Dunkelfelger's blue-capes. The royals' evacuation would also explain why we have been unable to contact them. As a means of preventing assassination, only those with direct authority are allowed into the royal palace. But if everywhere is on lockdown, even those registered to the Sovereignty will need to pass through the villas. Will the Zent break the seal so that Dunkelfelger's knights can enter?”

“Um... This sounds like the perfect opportunity to sneak

someone into the royal palace..." I said. The palace would need to lower its overall security level to accept knights of another duchy. Perhaps our enemies intended to exploit the opening that would create.

Ferdinand gave a light shrug. "I doubt their plan is that simple. The traitorous knights were bait, I would assume."

"Hm? 'Bait'?"

"To lure Dunkelfelger to the royal palace and split our force. For there to be infighting to begin with, the knight commander must not have the entire Order on his side. He probably lacked the troops necessary to win back the Adalgisa villa. But by drawing our allies to the royal palace, he has more than halved the size of our army."

Perhaps out of sheer enthusiasm, Aub Dunkelfelger had mustered a force larger than all of our knights combined. And to nobody's surprise, his troops were much stronger than ours. By luring them to the palace, our foes had dealt a heavy blow to our combat potential.

"Does this mean we've been discovered...?" I asked.

"Dunkelfelger's troops were anything but subtle; any one of the knights serving Raublut could easily have spotted them. And if someone reported our joint attack on the villa, of course our enemy would recognize them as the main source of our strength."

Heisshitze nodded. "Moreover, if our opponents wish to eliminate a large chunk of their opposition at once, they could unleash their instant-death poison once my fellow knights are in the royal palace."

Though we had several countermeasures, the most we could really do against instant-death poison was cover our mouths and make sure we had our jureves at the ready. Even then, there was only so much jureves could do for us, and drinking too much would produce serious consequences. Our opponents, on the other hand, had antidotes and neutralizers for the poison.

"W-We need to warn Aub Dunkelfelger..." I stammered. Just thinking about the potential slaughter made my blood run cold.

Heisshitze met my eyes, contemplated the matter for a moment, and then shook his head. "I will contact him, but I do not believe he will stop."

"Most likely not," Ferdinand added. "He will continue his charge no matter what dangers we warn him of. One might consider

it quite a convenient outcome for whoever laid the traps... though I doubt whatever they have set up will work as intended.”

Oh, I see what he means. Aub Dunkelfelger is the kind of guy to march straight into a trap and tear it apart with his bare hands. Then he'd carry on fighting like nothing even happened.

My nerves calmed almost immediately.

“Lord Ferdinand—let us reunite once the villa has been fully searched,” Heisshitze said with an overbearing smile. “The royal family will appreciate the news that they have you and your many schemes on their side.”

I paused. Would the royals really want to join forces with a man who had wished death upon them? I was sure he would use the opportunity to advance any number of devious plots, which seemed more like a cause for concern.

Ferdinand shook his head. “The king requested assistance from Dunkelfelger specifically. No such appeal was sent to Ahrensbach, and no good can come of acting independently. That was the reason your aub asked Lady Rozemyne to give the order, was it not?”

Indeed, if acting independently were acceptable, Aub Dunkelfelger would have rushed to the royal family’s rescue the moment he sensed danger in the air. That he’d shown any restraint at all proved the importance of having an official request for aid.

“Furthermore,” Ferdinand continued, “Ahrensbach is being accused of treason. If we involved ourselves in the situation at the palace, the royal family would not know whether we were there as friends or foes. Our arrival would trouble them more than anything else.”

“Certainly not!” Heisshitze declared. “The royal family would welcome you and Lady Rozemyne with open arms!”

I sincerely doubted the royals would welcome Ahrensbach knights. In fact, it would be a serious problem if they did. Were I ever to do something so foolish, Ferdinand would surely smack me with a harisen and tell me to be more suspicious.

“In any case,” Ferdinand said, “considering whether we should arbitrarily unite with Dunkelfelger and arouse unnecessary suspicion can come later, once we have found Gervasio.”

My duty as Aub Ahrensbach was to capture Detlinde and the Lanzenavians, not get involved with the internal affairs of the Sovereign Knight’s Order. I wouldn’t expect the royal family to help out if a similar issue plagued the knights of Ehrenfest. The royals

had once said it was up to us to solve our own problems, so I saw no reason to intervene.

“Heisshitze,” I said, “I am far more concerned about Professor Solange, who has not responded to anyone’s attempts to contact her, than about the royals, who have the reliable knights of Dunkelfelger marching to their rescue. I do not doubt your peers in the slightest. Ferdinand, when it gets a little brighter out, I would like to check on the library.”

“We can do that once we are done here. I must first speak with Alstede.”

Alstede's Side

Ferdinand returned to the first room we had entered and waved a hand. Moments later, Alstede was dragged out of the corner by two knights.

“Rozemyne,” he said, “play the role of a scholar and record this interrogation. You have some convenient writing tools at your disposal, do you not?”

Was he urging me to cast stylo and write in my *Grutrisheit*, all to save some paper? I was starting to get the feeling that Ferdinand was using his Book of Mestionora rather sacrilegiously.

“Now then...” Ferdinand continued, his eyes fixed on Alstede. “It is time for you to speak.”

To begin with, Alstede said only that she was following her mother's orders, but her attempt to withhold information quickly fell apart as Ferdinand methodically broke her spirit. He revealed Georgine's death and the many crimes she had committed, went through Alstede's malefactions one by one, and then said that he would spare her pre-baptized daughter back in Ahrensbach if she cooperated. That did the trick.

“The keys to the villa are with Lord Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander,” she said. “He started commuting between the villa and the Lanzenave Estate last autumn.”

Raublut had revealed the existence of the teleporter during the late Aub Ahrensbach's funeral. On several occasions since then, Detlinde and Georgine had ordered Alstede to head to the Lanzenave Estate and open the door for him.

“Isn't it strange that Raublut has the key to the villa?” I said. “I thought it would remain with the royal family.”

“I expect the key to the front gate is still in the royal family's possession, but the same might not be true for the key to the back door,” Ferdinand explained. “It would normally be given to the villa's head attendant, like how Lasfam has a key to your library. In an ideal world, the keys would all be stored in the same place, but we do not know whether they were all retrieved during the closing

of the villa. The main and side buildings were overseen by separate groups.”

Though we didn’t know how, Raublut had ended up with a key to the Adalgisa villa. Georgine had gone on to execute her plan, tricking Letizia into poisoning Ferdinand, and then let slip the dogs of war once she’d received confirmation that Ferdinand was dead. She had gone to Ehrenfest while Detlinde and the Lanzenavian royals went to the villa to obtain schtappes.

“In advance of their move, I did as Mother instructed and registered the Lanzenavian royals as Ahrensbach nobles so they could obtain their own schtappes.”

Raublut had served as their guide following their move to the Adalgisa villa. He had explained to them all that they would need to stay hidden for several days until Detlinde had obtained the Grutrissheit and the Lanzenavians had finished absorbing their schtappes. Detlinde had then protested that it was scandalous for unwed men and women to live under the same roof, prompting Lanzenave and the people of Ahrensbach to stay in separate buildings so that she could sleep away from Leonzio.

“As if spending her every waking moment with him were not scandalous enough...” Ferdinand griped. I couldn’t help but agree with him.

“I never knew Lady Detlinde cared about appearances...” I said. “I would not have guessed it from how she acts during tea parties, to say nothing of the spectacle she became during her dedication whirl. Perhaps she has her own, bizarre standards that none of us can understand.”

Alstede disregarded my comment with a troubled smile and continued, “Once everyone had their rooms, we went to the Farthest Hall to gather the schtappes. It was my duty as aub to open the door.”

But she hadn’t been able to. Raublut had gone ahead to make sure the coast was clear, only to find Sigiswald walking down the hallway with his retainers.

“Raublut determined that if Prince Sigiswald was circling the shrines, it was highly likely he would find the Lanzenavians,” Alstede said. “And so we stopped for the day.”

Wasn’t that just when Prince Sigiswald went to Ehrenfest’s tea party room to speak with Sylvester? I don’t think he was circling the shrines.

I balked at Sylvester’s godly luck; he had foiled Raublut’s plans

purely by accident.

“That night, Lord Raublut received an emergency summons from the royal family. He told us the following day that Lord Ferdinand’s retainers had traveled to the Royal Academy to inform Aub Ehrenfest of their charge’s predicament. Our movements had thus been exposed.”

The royal palace had been locked down in anticipation of an attack by Ahrensbach, and Sovereign knights had been stationed around the Ahrensbach Dormitory and the doors to the central building. However, because Raublut had been informed of these precautions, Alstede’s group had simply waited inside the villa. Days had passed, and the Sovereignty had seen neither hide nor hair of an invasion.

“I spent my time brewing rejuvenation potions, waiting for the Order to lower their guard,” Alstede said. “No matter what happened next, the potions were going to be useful. The Lanzenavians took that time to practice forming their armor.”

As it turned out, forming armor had been a simple matter for the Lanzenavians, since they had plenty of experience with using feystones. They had also practiced making highbeasts and confirmed ways they could use feystones alongside the tools they already had at their disposal.

And then we launched a surprise attack in the dead of night, rendering their preparations useless.

“We knew the royals could not stay in their evacuation room forever,” Alstede continued. “And as they lowered their guard, they withdrew their knights. It was not long before the only ones still stationed at the Royal Academy were Lord Raublut’s collaborators, which allowed us to finally resume our work.”

The royals hadn’t been the only anxious ones; Detlinde had apparently hated spending so much time holed up in the villa.

“I attempted to open the door to the Farthest Hall so the Lanzenavians could obtain their schtappes, but it remained firmly shut. Presumably because I did not have the Zent’s acknowledgment.”

Hmm... I wonder... I’d already dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation by then, so I assume she just wasn’t the aub anymore.

Ferdinand scoffed. He must have been thinking the same thing.

“However, that did not pose an issue for us; Lord Raublut had already devised a backup plan. The Sovereign High Bishop and

several blue priests were there to help us.”

Each year, when Spring Prayer drew near, the Sovereign temple submitted a request for the Farthest Hall to be opened. On this occasion, they had planned ahead so that it would align with the Lanzenavians’ trip to the Royal Academy. Anastasius, Hildebrand, and Immanuel had all been in attendance.

“Wait, did you say ‘Immanuel’...?” I asked. “I thought he was the High Priest, not the High Bishop.”

“Was he not appointed to the role just recently?” Alstede stared at me quizzically. “My husband, Blasius, attended the ceremony. I was in the villa at the time, so I do not know the details.”

Alstede had wanted to go home the moment she’d realized that she couldn’t open the Farthest Hall; she felt useless in the villa, and she was worried about her daughter. Nonetheless, she had pushed down those emotions and stayed put, for she had been told that the aub would need to grant the Lanzenavians their schtappes and ensure good relations moving forward.

“On the day the Sovereign temple arrived, the Lanzenavians made feystone armor as instructed, wore black capes brought to them by Lord Raublut, and posed as members of the Sovereign Knight’s Order. Prince Anastasius watched the priests line up the chalices and divine instruments for a bit, then took a portion of the Order’s knights to check other parts of the Royal Academy.”

As well as overseeing the Sovereign temple, Anastasius had apparently been tasked with checking that the Royal Academy was safe enough for the Zent to return to his normal activities.

“Once the second prince was gone, I was told, Prince Hildebrand opened the door so that the Lanzenavians could obtain their schtappes.”

If someone with every element performed the ritual to obtain divine protections, there was a chance they would go straight from the altar to the Garden of Beginnings. That must not have been what happened with Hildebrand, though; someone would surely have said something by now. I suspected that the third prince had opened the door beside the altar and taken the route students used during class.

“The Zent must have given Prince Hildebrand permission to obtain his schtappe,” Alstede concluded.

“That can’t be true,” I replied, shaking my head. “I told the royal family that obtaining a schtappe at a young age leads to

severe complications later down the line. The Zent would never have permitted such a thing.”

Anyone who obtained their schtappe early and then gained a bunch of divine protections and increased their mana capacity through compression would soon find themselves unable to control their mana. Considering that Hildebrand was working hard to compress his mana and studying ancient language so that he could enter the underground archive and do work befitting a royal, I sincerely doubted that his father, the Zent, would set him up for such hardships.

“Say no more, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand interjected. “Alstede cannot provide the confirmation we seek; she was not there to witness the event. In all likelihood, Raublut falsely claimed that the Zent gave his permission as a way of manipulating Prince Hildebrand into opening the door.”

Anger surged through my chest. Raublut was the *Sovereign knight commander*. To use Ehrenfest as an example, this was like Melchior making a request, Sylvester refusing it, and then Karstedt wrongly declaring that the aub had given his permission.

“This betrayal is far too cruel...” I muttered.

Were Karstedt to approach my knights and tell them he had convinced Sylvester to allow something that was previously refused, not a single person would doubt him. Nobody would even think to check with the aub—that was how much trust Karstedt had cultivated as the knight commander. The same must have been true for Raublut, the Zent’s head guard knight and commander of the Sovereign Knight’s Order.

“Indeed,” Ferdinand replied, his voice dry and completely devoid of sympathy. “But for the prince to have fallen for it, he must have *wanted* to obtain his schtappe early. The lure would not have worked otherwise. I do not know why Prince Hildebrand clung to that desire, but it created a weakness for Raublut to exploit. Only a fool would choose to obtain his schtappe at such a young age—and to make matters worse, he gave the Lanzenavians schtappes in the process. He will soon face the consequences, and we cannot pity him when he does.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Because he had put his trust in the wrong man, Hildebrand would forever be cursed with a weak schtappe tied to his pre-Academy mana capacity and elemental affinities. He would even be held responsible for giving the

Lanzenavians their schtappes.

“Do not let this torment you,” Ferdinand chided me. “Only a fool would try to bear the consequences of somebody else’s actions.” He then rounded on Alstede. “Your claim that you have the royal family’s support is laughable. Anyone can see that Raublut deceived the young prince. I would advise you not to lie to me again.”

Alstede’s blue hair swayed as she shook her head; then she bit her lip and cast her eyes down. “I was not referring to Prince Hildebrand when I said we were cooperating with the royal family. I meant Lord Gervasio.”

“I see. So you meant you were working with *Lanzenave’s* royals.”

Alstede shook her head again, then dropped the most stunning bombshell yet: “Lord Gervasio has rejoined the Yurgenschmidt royal family.”

The atmosphere in the room changed immediately. Some of the knights demanded that she elaborate, but not Ferdinand; his expression darkened, and a deep furrow creased his brow. He began tapping his temple.

“Already? Those who go to Lanzenave have their medals moved elsewhere. Were they returned...? They should be in the possession of... Ah, I see. *That* was his true goal.”

For a moment, Ferdinand seemed relieved, like he’d just pieced together an especially tough puzzle. Then he let out a low, frustrated sigh.

“Come on, Ferdinand.” I gave him a light smack on the arm. “Don’t leave us all in the dark. Tell us what you’ve figured out.” My Book of Mestionora contained almost no information about the whole Adalgisa matter, so an explanation was very much in order.

“Raublut’s primary aim was not to secure the Lanzenavians their schtappes but to remove Prince Hildebrand and his retainers from the room.” He turned to Alstede. “I assume the Sovereign priests began checking and moving medals while the prince was getting his schtappe.”

Her entire body went rigid. “How did you know that?”

“It was fairly obvious.”

“I disagree! Please explain!”

“Think of what happens when a person’s medal is destroyed. You should understand that much.”

The consequences of a destroyed medal weren't taught until the last year of the archduke candidate course. I already knew them, however, for I'd already memorized the coursework for the entire six years.

"If they are in the duchy where they were registered, they will die," I said. "Otherwise, they will simply lose the ability to form their schtappe."

I thought back to the situation with Grausam. Sylvester had intended to execute him by breaking his medal, but the man had already escaped to Ahrensbach. He had survived at the cost of losing his schtappe.

Ferdinand gave a satisfied nod, then continued. "Since destroying a medal takes the owner's schtappe with it, those who return to Lanzenave have their medals preserved. Upon their departure, the medals are moved from a storeroom for branch families to one for foreigners." He was speaking so much like a professor that I subconsciously straightened my back and gripped my pen like an eager student.

Alstede trembled as she looked up at Ferdinand. By all accounts, he shouldn't have been there; Georgine had arranged for him to die in Ahrensbach's Mana Replenishment hall. Yet he had somehow survived and was now drawing out all the information she had tried to keep hidden. He must have seemed terrifying to her.

"How do you know so much about Lanzenave medals?" Alstede asked. "Such things aren't covered at the Royal Academy."

"I read various old documents about them. You cannot blame me if your education is lacking."

Oh, right. By "old documents," he must mean his Book of Mestionora. It doesn't seem right to accuse someone who doesn't have one of not being educated enough, but Alstede isn't going to argue with a man who came first-in-class six times in a row. I can't even search my own Book for that information, since those sections are all missing for me.

"We are getting sidetracked," Ferdinand said. "Given that Gervasio left the branch family and went to Lanzenave, his medal would also be in the Sovereign temple's possession."

"Is it not strange that the Sovereign temple has the medals?" I asked. "I would have guessed they were being kept in the royal palace. In Ehrenfest, we store nobles' medals in the castle."

“They are born in this villa, which is on the Royal Academy’s grounds. That is not the same as being born in the royal palace.”

Ferdinand chose not to elaborate, but I could sense that those born in the Adalgisa villa weren’t considered part of a *normal* royal branch family.

“In any case,” he continued, “the crux of the matter is that Raublut worked with Immanuel of the Sovereign temple to return Gervasio to Yurgenschmidt royalty. Gervasio might only have reentered a branch family, but still—their objective is likely the Grutrissheit.”

I didn’t know how thoroughly the royal family cleared the room when sharing intelligence, but if Raublut knew about the underground archive, the requirement of circling the Royal Academy’s shrines, and the reason for my upcoming adoption, then he might have thought his plan would allow Gervasio to obtain the Grutrissheit.

“The mana in the medal would confirm Gervasio’s identity and make it clear to Immanuel that he’s omni-elemental, right?” I asked.

“Yes. And if the knight commander identified the royal family as the source of his knowledge, a religious fundamentalist like Immanuel would throw up his hands and welcome Gervasio with open arms. It must be known that the Sovereign temple is made up of morons who would declare Detlinde the next Zent simply because she caused the selection circle to flash for the briefest of moments.”

By moving his medal, the Sovereign temple had turned Gervasio from a foreign Lanzenavian to the Yurgenschmidt royal closest to obtaining the Grutrissheit.

“Thus concludes my conjecture,” Ferdinand said. “Though I suspect it was not far from the truth. Is that correct, Alstede?”

She nodded, still trembling. Could anyone be surprised that he was right on the money?

“Immanuel promised that he would move the medal, but only after using it to confirm that Lord Gervasio really was who he claimed to be,” Alstede explained. “In return, Raublut promised to reward the Sovereign temple when Lord Gervasio obtained the Grutrissheit and formally became the Zent. We were not made privy to the details, though.”

“I am impressed you would admit your plan for Gervasio to obtain the Grutrissheit. Detlinde would never accept that. You have

been working against your own younger sister, then.”

For a moment, I felt sorry for Detlinde. It seemed like everyone in her family saw her as no more than a convenient tool to be used. But then I remembered what she had done to Ferdinand, and my anger came back stronger than ever. The only way I could avoid getting emotional was by focusing my thoughts on Raublut’s plotting. His obtaining the key to the Adalgisa villa, contacting Ahrensbach, and preparing countermeasures for anything that might go wrong all reminded me of Georgine’s *modus operandi*.

“To think the Sovereign temple was also under Raublut’s control...” I mused. “This plan must have been set in motion long ago for its roots to run this deep. I never thought Immanuel and Raublut would work together. They seemed so at odds with each other when my bible was being searched.”

“Something must have occurred since then that caused their goals to align,” Ferdinand replied. He saw Immanuel as the fool who had improperly identified a Zent candidate, but I would never forget the disturbing look that man had given me upon seeing my *schtappe* transform into a divine instrument. The thought that he was working with Raublut shook me to my core.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, “do you have any strong feelings about Immanuel...?” He must have noticed the concern on my face.

“I met with him on several occasions while performing ceremonies at the Royal Academy. In that time, I came to discover his intense fixation with making divine instruments and reviving old rituals. The look in his eyes was so gross and scary that it disturbed me.”

I was used to fanaticism from my dealings with Hartmut, but that was nothing compared to what I’d seen from Immanuel; there had been a particularly nasty light behind those gray orbs. The ceremonies had taken place after Ferdinand moved to Ahrensbach, so he didn’t think all that much about Immanuel, but the man’s disturbing behavior would forever be burned into my memory.

“I see...” Ferdinand said. “To summarize, then, a troublesome and thoughtless fundamentalist with an obsession for the power of eld cares only about returning the *Grutrissheit* to Yurgenschmidt. For that sake, he would even help a Lanzenavian to become the Zent.” He cast his eyes down in thought, then sighed. “So, what happened after the medals were tampered with?”

Anastasius hadn’t come back from his inspection of the Royal

Academy—not even by the time Hildebrand returned from the Farthest Hall with his Divine Will. Raublut had advised the third prince to return to his villa posthaste so that he would not accidentally touch anyone.

From there, Hildebrand's retainers had sent an ordonnanz to Anastasius informing him of their intention to leave. Those of the Sovereign temple had departed soon after. Only once they were alone had the Lanzenavians beaten a hasty retreat back to the Adalgisa villa and started absorbing their schtappes.

"Prince Anastasius circled the shrines, and the Royal Academy returned to its usual state," Alstede said. "I wished to be granted a prompt return to Ahrensbach. The Lanzenavians had obtained their schtappes, which marked the end of my duties."

However, when she had made to leave, the door within the Lanzenave Estate had refused to open for her. She had then tried to return home via the Ahrensbach Dormitory, but its door had also remained shut. She had reported these strange occurrences to Raublut, who had returned the news that their duchy's foundation had been stolen. He had not known who was responsible or how Ahrensbach was faring.

"In her anger, Detlinde sent a letter to Ahrensbach. We became even more devoted to obtaining the Grutrissheit so that we could regain our foundation..."

"In other words," I said, "you casually circled the shrines."

Each time someone said "Detlinde," I remembered seeing Ferdinand paralyzed and on the brink of death in Ahrensbach's Mana Replenishment hall. My anger was getting harder to control, but I forced a smile and tried not to think about it. Sure, I might have sounded a little caustic, but I deserved to be praised for not taking things any further than that.

Alstede looked troubled as she said, "I-Indeed. Lord Gervasio and Detlinde circled the shrines with the help of the rejuvenation potions we made. That is the thing about my sister—though she may be a bit thoughtless at times and tends to think she is the center of the world, she is not a bad person at heart. She worked so very hard for our sakes."

My blood started to boil. Alstede had given a pretty standard response for someone trying to defend her little sister, and it was true that I didn't know much about their relationship behind the scenes, but still. My head started to cool while the rest of me felt

practically aflame. I couldn't remember the last time this sensation had overtaken me. I exuded mana through a smile and looked Alstede dead in the eye.

"Goodness, Lady Alstede. What a funny thing to say. To carry out her nefarious scheme, Lady Detlinde kidnapped and murdered the head attendant of a mere child. She used a paralyzing drug on Ferdinand when instant-death poison failed to dispatch him, then put schtappe-sealing bracelets on him and set him atop a magic circle so that he would die a slow death as his mana drained. Oh, but she is good at heart, is she? What a unique appraisal. The two of you certainly are Lady Georgine's daughters."

"I... Ngh!"

Alstede's eyes widened, and she clutched at her chest. Her mouth opened and closed in a failed attempt to speak. I increased the force of my Crushing while watching her writhe in agony.



“Rozemyne!” Ferdinand shouted. “Control your emotions! You are leaking mana!” He grabbed my wrist before any of my knights could react.

“Fear not...” I replied, though my eyes did not move from Alstede. “I, too, am growing. I can now focus my Crushing on a single person.”

“I understand your anger, but we need her alive. She will play a crucial role in our future plans.”

Ferdinand used his free hand to block my vision and interrupt the Crushing. Alstede coughed and spluttered, while my retainers shouted my name.

“I will contain Rozemyne’s mana,” Ferdinand said. “The rest of you, take Alstede to the front garden. Do not let Rozemyne see her again!”

“Understood!” Laurenz and Matthias replied in unison.

Alstede was whisked out of the room, leaving me with nowhere to direct my overflowing mana and anger. “I’m frustrated, Ferdinand. I’m mad,” I said. “If you think I’m going to forgive anyone, then think again.”

“I understand that, but contain your mana; otherwise, I will need to press a feystone against your skin.” There wasn’t a trace of empathy in his voice, but even now, he was being considerate of my feystone phobia. That eased my anger in no time at all; there was nothing to gain from taking my frustrations out on him.

Ferdinand relaxed his grip on my arm; he must have felt that my mana was receding. “In terms of your emotions, I see you have not grown at all since we first met.”

“The gods blessed me with rapid physical growth. Maybe, through continued prayer, I can convince them to grow my mind as well.”

“You have prayed more than anyone else in Yurgenschmidt. If not even that has been enough, then I would not hold my breath.” His hand was still covering my eyes, but the fact we were even having this discussion told me I was calming down.

At last, Ferdinand took his hand away from my face. Then he started checking my mana to make sure it was safe to release my arm. My knights appeared to want to say something—they kept raising their hands as though to interject—but with Alstede gone,

my mana was unlikely to rampage again.

“Detlinde’s moral character is no longer relevant or important,” Ferdinand stressed. “What matters now is the revelation that Gervasio was circling the shrines. Did you process *any* of the information we just received...? Good grief.”

As he returned to inspecting me, I noticed the urgency in his eyes. And then it hit me:

It doesn’t take long to circle the shrines, does it?

Sure, the process required a lot of mana, but that could easily be remedied with a bunch of rejuvenation potions. In my case, I’d already dedicated so much mana through ceremonies that the tablets hadn’t needed much more from me—but did that even matter? Time would remain frozen while he was inside the shrines. It had taken me less than a day to obtain all the tablets.

Could it be...? Has Gervasio finished circling the shrines?

I thought back to Hirschur’s report; she had said the outsiders were seen by the scholar building. There was a shrine near there. Assuming that Gervasio had already been circling them when he was spotted, it was likely he now had every single one of the tablets. Any anger still coursing through me dissipated in an instant.

“In an ideal world,” Ferdinand said, “Gervasio would be circling the shrines as we speak. Perhaps he thought it best to act under cover of darkness. But why would the Sovereign Knight’s Order have revealed its treachery if not because he had already finished and was on the cusp of obtaining the Grutrissheit? Raublut and the others hail Gervasio as the next Zent; where do you think he is now?”

The blood drained from my face. There was only one place someone in Gervasio’s shoes would go. “Professor Solange stopped responding to ordonnanzes—was that not what Hirschur told us?”

Ferdinand’s cold, calm voice echoed in my mind over and over again.

Rescuing Solange

My body trembled, and my breath caught in my throat. I couldn't shake the thought of Solange sprawled out and on the verge of death, like Ferdinand in Ahrensbach's Mana Replenishment hall.

"W-We must hurry to the library..." I said and turned to my knights. They nodded at once, having been listening to our entire conversation. It was heartening to see them all ready to go despite the suddenness of this revelation.

I stepped toward Cornelius, only to feel a hand again grab my arm. "Hold on," Ferdinand said. "There are decisions to be made first. To begin with, who will stay here, who will go with you, and who will go ahead of you?"

I turned around and glared at him. "There is no time for that. I must rescue Professor Solange."

"I understand the urgency of our situation as well as you do, but that does not mean we can drop everything else. We must share the intelligence we have gained and decide what to do with the prisoners. Moreover, who has the key to this villa? There is a chance that Gervasio's group will return while we are at the library."

We had no idea where Gervasio was or what he was doing. He might have been at the library trying to get the Grutrissheit, but maybe he was still circling the shrines or fighting at the royal palace in an attempt to kill the royal family.

"If we can squeeze their objectives and current whereabouts from the prisoners, we might be able to plan ahead," Ferdinand continued. "Furthermore, if we leave too few guards here, Gervasio's group could manage to free their allies. We will be at an overwhelming disadvantage if they recover the tools we have confiscated and rearm themselves."

Ferdinand regarded me with stern eyes as he went on to list all the potential dangers: "We conquered the villa so easily not just because our opponents overestimated the strength of Verbergen's

concealment but also because we attacked with overwhelming numbers in the deep of the night. We came up with a plan and successfully executed it. That does not mean our might is vastly superior to theirs. The outcome of a battle where they are armed and ready cannot be known to us.”

The Lanzenavians had great enough mana capacities to have escaped our knights’ restraints, silver equipment that blocked mana, various means of deploying instant-death poison, and other tools unique to their country. And now they had schtappes as well. We might have been able to capture them once, but Ferdinand was right—we could not risk being overoptimistic.

“On an even more important note,” Ferdinand said, “we no longer have the strongest part of our army. Dunkelfelger’s knights are busy fighting at the royal palace and might be for some time; we do not know how much of the Sovereign Knight’s Order has sided with Raublut. We will need to manage our prisoners with only the knights we brought from Ahrensbach, all while being wary of a counterattack from Gervasio’s group or the Sovereign Order.”

We couldn’t even move the prisoners and their equipment somewhere safe. The fact that I’d yet to make brooches for entering the Ahrensbach Dormitory limited our options.

Ferdinand continued, “Both entering the Royal Academy’s library and passing through the door to the underground archive will require Professor Solange’s assistance. That is precisely why we can still send her ordonnanzes. At no point did Professors Hirschur or Rauffen say their birds refused to fly to her, so we can safely assume she is still alive. Wait just a brief moment until we have given out our instructions.”

“But what if we end up being too late as a result?! Even the slightest delay could have serious consequences! Can you blame me for wanting to get Professor Solange out of danger? Let me go on ahead, at the very least.” I would never have the patience to wait for him to finish delegating.

Still grabbing my arm, Ferdinand shot my knights a sympathetic look. “I suppose you charged into Ahrensbach with the same momentum? If you truly cannot wait, then order your guard knights who are not name-sworn to you to scout ahead. Do not follow them to the library until they have confirmed it is safe.”

“But why?!” I demanded. I wanted to go there more than anyone, so why was he denying me?

Ferdinand gazed down at me without a word, then reached out and pinched my cheek. “You are getting too worked up. Calm down. There is a reason you must not go there—the library’s magic tools can sense their master’s mana. I cannot be sure how they would respond to your name-sworn, who are under the influence of your mana, but we should err on the side of caution. If our enemies really are there when those two shumils announce your arrival, who knows what they might do? Perhaps they will prepare an ambush or take Solange hostage.”

My eyes widened in response.

“The moment someone puts a weapon to Professor Solange’s throat, we will need to remain passive,” Ferdinand informed me. “You wish to save her, but rushing to her rescue will put her in the most danger. Send your guard knights to investigate the area first. You will need to go there eventually—one must be at least an archnoble to reach the underground archive and an archduke candidate or member of royalty to enter. On top of that, there are things you will need to do as the master of those magic tools. Wait until then.”

In the face of such a logical argument, what was I to do? I couldn’t charge ahead and risk putting Solange in even greater danger.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Cornelius said, “as Laurenz and Matthias are name-sworn to you, Angelica and I shall take some of the other knights to scout out the library.”

“Thank you.”

Cornelius waited for Laurenz and Matthias to return from moving Alstede; then he and Angelica set out for the library. He had probably chosen Angelica over Leonore because she was armed with Stenluke and boasted such tremendous speed.

Ferdinand was darting here and there as he gave everyone their new orders. He told Heisshitze’s group to put Lanzenave’s equipment into a hidden room with which he was registered.

“Many of these tools cannot be understood at a glance,” he said, “making them especially dangerous if we want to avoid a constant barrage of poison. Seal away all the silver weapons and armor.”

“Looking at this equipment, attacking at night with such an overwhelmingly large force was the best move,” Heisshitze remarked as he and the others gradually moved their mountain of tools into the hidden room. “Had we attacked when the

Lanzenavians were awake and able to use all this, even Dunkelfelger would have lost knights.”

The abundance of silver weapons and armor before me was evidence enough. It went to show just how seriously our foes had taken their invasion.

“Ferdinand, is there anything I can do?” I asked. “Just sitting and waiting is painful...”

“Would you look into what separates the royal family from its branches? I wish to know what Gervasio can do now that he has returned to the latter. There may be things I do not know in your Book.”

He hadn’t even hesitated to give me a task. I made my Grutrissheit and started researching the royal branch families. Their members could apparently enter the library without being registered, but they couldn’t go any farther into the underground archive than I, as they weren’t part of the main family.

“Hmm... In that case, it is unlikely that Gervasio has already obtained the Grutrissheit,” Ferdinand said, the tension draining from his shoulders. He sent ordonnances to Hartmut and Justus requesting updates on their interrogations, then started dividing the knights into those who would go to the library and those who would stay to guard the prisoners. I waited impatiently for him to finish.

A white bird came in and perched on Ferdinand, then reported in Cornelius’s voice: “Given the time, the library’s doors are locked. We circled around in search of another entrance, and while we could not find one, we did glimpse a faint light through the office’s windows.”

It was almost first bell. No matter how much of an early riser Solange might have been, she would never have left her room while her attendants were still asleep.

Cornelius went on, “We could gain entry by breaking one of the windows, but we consider it too dangerous to act without reinforcements.”

“I am bringing some now,” Ferdinand said in response. “If you see no traces of a break-in, then do not attempt to force entry. The library’s magic tools will eliminate intruders without question. Stay among the trees on the south side until you reunite with Rozemyne.”

Ferdinand had thoroughly investigated Schwartz’s and Weiss’s

creation, so he knew exactly what the tools would do to anyone who entered the library through illicit means. I closed my ears to his description, not wanting to hear it. Then he extended a hand to me.

“Let us go.”

“Right.”

Sixty-some knights tore through the night sky. Hartmut and Justus were staying behind to watch over the prisoners, but the rest of our retainers were with us.

“Hartmut was very disappointed,” Clarissa told me. “He said the library was something of a miracle hot spot for you.”

She started repeating all the “miracles” Hartmut had raved about while counting them on her fingers. I intervened when she was partway through an exaggerated and excessively flowery account of my first trip to the library and my excitement-born blessing that had revived the magic tools; it was best to keep Ahrensbach’s knights in the dark about my embarrassing history. My long-term goal was to turn their duchy into a massive library—and to that end, I needed to become a librarian respected by all.

We rendezvoused with the knights hidden in the forest south of the library. Cornelius and the other scouts hadn’t seen any Sovereign knights on the premises, but they *had* noticed the occasional ordonnanz fly out of the library and toward the central building. Upon their arrival, they had also spotted guards in the hallway that connected to all the dormitories.

“Taking the library’s front entrance is out of the question; it sits in full view of the central building’s connecting hallway. But if we enter through a window, the reading rooms will provide—”

“No, we will not be doing that,” Ferdinand interjected. “We have the magic tools’ owner with us; we can simply enter through the back door.” He pointed to the outdoor stairway that connected the garden outside the librarians’ dormitory to the second closed-stack archive. I could see the door Solange had allowed us to escape through during last year’s Archduke Conference, when Detlinde had almost spotted us.

“Won’t it be locked...?” I asked.

“You can summon the library’s magic tools and tell them to unlock it.”

It wouldn’t be that simple, but I climbed onto his highbeast

nonetheless. We landed outside the library's back door.

"Schwartz, Weiss," I said. "Could you let us in?"

There was a pause... and then a *click* as the two shumils unlocked the door for us. They welcomed me as they always did.

"Here, milady."

"Been a long time."

Wow. It really was that simple.

We hadn't faced any resistance at all; I could see why assigning the shumils' master was a matter of such grave importance. I was also starting to understand those who had said an Ehrenfest first-year could never be trusted with them. Of course they'd wanted such magic tools to be transferred to a member of royalty or a reliable Sovereign noble.

Hmm... Then why is everyone else so okay with me being the tools' master? Do they not know about this function of theirs?

The most reasonable course of action would probably be to explain the situation and return the tools to the royal family. That could wait, though; considering how useful they were, it made sense to hold on to them for a little while longer.

"Schwartz, Weiss—where is Professor Solange right now?" I asked.

The two shumils began hopping around.

"Solange. In her office."

"Solange. Not moving."

I charged to her rescue without even thinking—or at least I tried to before Ferdinand grabbed me. "Not yet," he said. "Heisshitze!"

"Right!"

Heisshitze went ahead of us and cautiously entered the office, bringing along several knights proficient with healing magic. One of them confirmed that Professor Solange was inside, motionless, and that the room was free of traps.

At once, Ferdinand shot forward. He was moving so briskly and with such broad strides that I couldn't even hope to catch up with him. Was this really the same man who had advised us to hang back a moment ago?

"Ah...!"

"Apologies."

In my scramble to follow Ferdinand, I'd managed to lose my balance. It was a good thing he'd turned just in time to catch me. I

was still recovering from my shock when he set me back on my feet, told me to come with him, and then sped into Solange's office. His rushing on ahead was just cruel.

"Hold on, Ferdinand," I called. But as I tried to speed up to match his pace, Leonore raised a hand and urged me to stop.

"Might I advise you to slow down, Lady Rozemyne?"

"But—"

"Lord Ferdinand is acting for your sake. He wishes to confirm Professor Solange's status before you see her and provide some extra healing if she needs it. When a man shows you such immense consideration, it is best to gracefully accept it."

There was kindness in Leonore's indigo eyes, and she took a graceful step forward as if to lead me by example. Before I could do the same, I heard Ferdinand cast Heilschmerz's healing and saw a green flash come out of the office up ahead.

"Leonore was right..."

"Professor Solange, are you okay?" I asked. Some of the knights were slowly helping her to her feet.

"And who might you be?" she asked, staring at me quizzically.

"It's me—Rozemyne."

"Oh my! How you've grown. I did not even recognize you!" Though she wore a smile, I could see how exhausted she was. I wanted to let her rest, but we needed to question her first.

"Professor Solange, what happened...?"

"Lord Raublut came here with a man. Lord Gervasio, his name was—a member of the royal branch family. I do not expect you to know him, but he wanted to obtain the Grutrissheit. He was exactly as I remembered."

"You know Gervasio?" Ferdinand asked, his eyes narrowed. "As I understand it, he was educated in the villa and did not attend the Royal Academy."

The nostalgia faded from Solange's eyes, replaced with curiosity. "I am surprised that *you* know him, Lord Ferdinand; he had to move far away a very long time ago. He used to come here all the time back when I was first assigned to the Academy's library. Between the end of spring and the end of autumn, it was—after the Archduke Conference concluded and the archlibrarians took their leave."

"Your reminiscing can wait," Ferdinand said. "Where is he

now?”

Solange looked around at the knights, well aware of the tension hanging over us all, and shook her head. “I apologize, but I could not tell you. He came yesterday evening. Schwartz and Weiss said that Hortensia had arrived, so I went to welcome her.”

Only it hadn’t been Hortensia. Solange had come out to find Gervasio, Raublut, and a group of Sovereign knights.

“Hortensia had succumbed to her illness and climbed the towering stairway...” she continued. “Lord Raublut told me he had come to retrieve her belongings from her room.”

Raublut had used Hortensia’s feystone to enter the librarians’ dormitory and go to his late wife’s room. In the meantime, Solange and Gervasio had reminisced about old times.

“Lord Raublut returned in no time at all,” Solange explained. “Then he told me to give him the keys to the underground archive. Weapons were thrust at me, and with the life of my attendant on the line, I complied and gave him what he wanted.”

Gervasio had claimed that he didn’t want to hurt an old friend, which was why he’d merely sealed Solange’s schtappe and tied her up so that she couldn’t seek help. The Sovereign knights with them had then dyed the keys before their group had continued to the underground archive.

“Lord Gervasio said that he would release me once he obtained the Grutrisheit, but here I remained. I even heard them leave the library. Given their loud, impatient footsteps, I imagine he failed to obtain it.” Solange gazed down at her bindings, clearly upset, and said, “Some way to treat an ‘old friend.’”

“Then what is Gervasio doing now?” I mused aloud. I didn’t expect anyone to have an answer; I just couldn’t fathom where he might have gone.

“Gervasio just like milady.”

“Gervasio went to Gramps.”

A tense look on his face, Ferdinand turned on his heel and strode out of the room, heading for the second floor. His retainers and half of the knights hurried out after him.

“Lady Rozemyne, what is Lord Gervasio doing...?” Professor Solange asked.

What am I supposed to say? “Your ‘old friend’ invaded Yurgenschmidt as part of a foreign power and is trying to obtain the Grutrisheit so he can become the next Zent. Raublut, the Sovereign

knight commander, has betrayed King Trauerqual, so you might be deemed a traitor for giving him those keys.” I don’t think so.

“You should rest for now,” I said. “You must be exhausted. I shall instruct Schwartz and Weiss to protect the library so that no one else can threaten your peace.”

I asked Leonore to take Solange to her room in the librarians’ dormitory. She returned a short while later, her face twisted in a grimace.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“The door to Professor Solange’s room was sealed with a magic tool so that her attendant could not leave. She had quite the terrifying night, knowing only that her lady had not returned.”

Curse you, Raublut!

“I shall activate the shumils’ combat mode,” I said.

I squeezed my eyes shut, then got Leonore to guide my hand to the feystones on Schwartz’s and Weiss’s foreheads. I poured mana into them, then did the same thing with their buttons to activate the aforementioned “combat mode.” Raublut’s group would *not* make it into the library again.

“Schwartz, Weiss—when we leave, start guarding Professor Solange. If anyone who isn’t registered comes to the library with its keys in their possession, confiscate the keys and then remove the intruder from the premises.”

“Protect Solange.”

“Confiscate the keys.”

It was then that Ferdinand came racing downstairs. “Rozemyne, return to the villa with the knights.” His urgency and the anxious look on his face told me Gervasio was already in the Garden of Beginnings.

“No,” I replied at once, shaking my head. “Let me come with you.”

“We cannot take that risk. Wait in the villa.”

Ferdinand continued past me and made to leave the reading room. For a moment, I was transported back to when I’d watched him leave for Ahrensbach. I reached out to him, and though my throat felt unbearably hoarse, I endured the pain and cried out.

“Wait! If you leave me behind, I’ll reveal your secrets to everyone!”

Ferdinand twitched, then turned around to glare at me. “Is this really the time for that?!”

“I can’t just sit around. I really can’t. And the more mana we have, the better, right?”

“Mana? What are you talking about?”

“Hm...? Haven’t you done this before? The fastest method is to blast ourselves an opening and charge on through, right?” It was rude enough that Erwaermen would decry it as blasphemous, but speed was our top priority. We would attack the huge magic circle in the sky with mana, force it to activate, and then rush inside.

“I am surprised you would propose something so extreme...”

“Seriously?! Come on! I’m following YOUR example!”

Ferdinand let out a resigned sigh. He strode over to me, pulled me up onto his shoulders, and then made to leave again. The sight stunned my knights silent, but they soon recovered and rushed to follow us.

“To be clear,” Ferdinand said, “I did not intend to ‘charge’ anywhere. I wished only to activate the circle by any means. You, on the other hand, are acting deliberately. We are not the same.”

“I suspect the person we are going to visit would disagree.” Erwaermen wouldn’t care whether our forced entry was accidental or otherwise; he would thoroughly scold us in both cases.

Ferdinand chuckled and said, “True enough.” He took me outside through the closed-stack archive before making his highbeast and setting me atop it. “Be ready to travel as fast as we can go.”

“Right!”

The Road to the Garden of Beginnings

“Lord Ferdinand, where are you going?!” Cornelius cried.

This was neither the time nor place to explain the details, so Ferdinand took to the sky without so much as a response. Heisshitze and my knights were quick to follow, which didn’t seem very wise; we were about to unleash a burst of powerful magic.

“Take cover under the ivory buildings!” Ferdinand shouted. “Or if you insist on coming with us, fly higher than we do! You will die if you linger between us and our target!”

He then accelerated, continuing his ascent. I wanted to turn around to see if anyone was still following us, but that wasn’t an option right now; I squeezed the reins tight so that I wouldn’t fall.

First bell rang as we continued toward the sky—a single chime that reached the entire Royal Academy. The sun had yet to rise.

“Rozemyne—use Leidenschaft’s spear,” Ferdinand instructed once we were high enough to look over the entire Academy. He made his schtappe into a one-handed sword, then began filling it with mana.

“The spear?” I repeated.

“Yes. Pour a tremendous amount of mana into it. Then, at my signal, close your eyes and throw it downward. No matter how poor your throwing arm might be, there is no way for you to miss; the magic circle covers the entire Royal Academy.”

I wouldn’t have the slightest bit of trouble pouring mana into Leidenschaft’s spear. But when it came to actually throwing the thing...

He’s right. My aim leaves a lot to be desired. But was that little jab really necessary?! Just because a statement is true doesn’t make it any less hurtful.

“Lord Ferdinand, what are you doing?!”

“Please stop him, Lady Rozemyne!”

Cries rang out while Ferdinand prepared to swing his mana-filled sword; some of our tagalongs must have caught up to us. They were mostly my knights, but I noticed a few blue capes as well.

Ferdinand gazed down at them and muttered, "If only they listened as well as Eckhart."

In truth, I thought that was a pretty unreasonable expectation. Eckhart was so devoted to Ferdinand that he obeyed the man's every word; I doubted anyone else would measure up to him.

"I warned you of the danger," Ferdinand called. "Hurry up and get above us. Or were you *hoping* to die?"

The knights blanched and did as they were told. Ferdinand waited until they were a safe distance away from us, grumbling all the while that this was a waste of the precious little time we had. His repeated displays of anger revealed just how anxious he must have been feeling.

"Don't do anything until they're all above us," I said. "I *will* stop you if you endanger my guard knights."

"I would never do something so cruel."

Heisshitze asked what we were doing as he passed us, but again, Ferdinand refused to answer. He shook his sword and said, "I see no reason to humor your questions. Get as far away from us as you can. Now, Rozemyne—begin."

"Right!" I exclaimed.

I closed my eyes, formed my schtappe, and cast lance. Though I couldn't see the spear, I felt its shaft appear in my hand. I channeled my mana into it, and it wasn't long before the weapon started to crackle.

"That will do," Ferdinand said. "Drop it."

"Lord Ferdinand?!"

"Lady Rozemyne! Stop!"

Two panicked cries came from above, but our hands were tied. If we didn't activate the magic circle and go to the Garden of Beginnings, Gervasio would obtain his own Book of Mestionora. I couldn't let someone who would massacre Ahrensbach's nobles for feystones and kidnap young women become the next king of Yurgenschmidt.

I need to stop him!

At last, I released the spear I was holding. It fell through the air like a blue shooting star piercing the otherwise gloomy night sky. Then my stomach dropped as Ferdinand took us into a steep dive, almost like he was chasing the light. He used the momentum to swing his sword down.



The attack unleashed a bright burst of rainbow mana that zipped through the air fast enough to catch up with my spear. Their mana mixed together; then there was an explosive *boom* and a sharp crackling sound as the projectile smashed into its target. In mere moments, the magic circle went from being a faint presence to a dazzling spectacle. Light shot from its center in a vast pillar that seemed to connect it with the sky.

That's the divine color of Wind! Mestionora?!

I remembered seeing the same light when I obtained my Book of Mestionora in the Garden of Beginnings. At least, something told me it was the same light.

We have to go. Now!

Ferdinand must have had the same thought; his arm tightened around my stomach, and we plunged through the pillar of light. But as we attempted to force our way into the Garden of Beginnings, a powerful gale surged out of the magic circle and pushed us away.

“Eep!”

The unexpected counterattack had caused me to cry out. I wasn't hurt at all, but the force of the impact had activated and popped several of my charms.

Ferdinand clicked his tongue, then withdrew a short distance. “That wind acts entirely like Schutzaria's shield—we cannot pass through it while we feel malice toward the person beyond it.” He stared at the pillar and muttered through gritted teeth that he hadn't encountered this problem last time, since there hadn't been anyone in the garden.

“In other words, infiltrating from above is no longer an option.” I couldn't help my feelings toward Gervasio, who had ravaged Ahrensbach, or toward Erwaermen, who had told me to kill Ferdinand. The wind would reject us no matter how many times we tried to pass through it.

“Correct. We will need to think of another approach. The two that immediately come to mind are returning to the villa to try again with silver clothes and using the entrance in the Farthest Hall.”

“To get through Schutzaria's shield, I suspect we would need to cover our entire bodies with silver cloth. That would put us at great risk, since we wouldn't be able to use our schtappes immediately

upon entering.”

Erwaermen had mentioned that he distinguished people using their mana, which meant Gervasio must have been in a state where his mana could be detected. Silver cloth would protect us from mana-based attacks but also stop us from using our schtappes, which wasn't ideal when we didn't know what weaponry our opponent might have.

“Gervasio is partway through obtaining his own Book of Mestionora, isn't he?” I asked.

“Almost certainly.”

I glared at the pillar of light. It had taken a hefty chunk of mana to activate the magic circle with Leidenschaft's spear, but now the wind was blocking us. What could we do to stop Gervasio from getting the Book of Mestionora?

If we can't go inside, maybe we can at least interrupt him from out here.

“Ferdinand—we couldn't pass through the magic circle, but we *did* manage to enter the light, didn't we?”

“What are you thinking...?” he asked with a guarded expression.

Sometimes it was better to show than tell. I used rucken to cancel the spear transformation of my schtappe, then used finsumhang to turn it into the divine cape of Darkness.

“Rozemyne. I told you to use that only as a last resort, remember?”

“Grimace all you want, but this is a last resort.”

Gervasio was already obtaining the Book of Mestionora in the Garden of Beginnings, and our attempt to use the magic circle to catch up to him hadn't worked. The only alternatives Ferdinand had proposed were trying again with silver cloth and getting the royal family out of hiding to open the Farthest Hall.

“Interrupting the light is the fastest way to stop Gervasio,” I continued, “and the danger is great enough that this feels like a justified response. Besides, won't it be significantly faster than going to fetch silver cloth or summoning the royal family?”

“Again with your extreme ideas...” Ferdinand mumbled, tapping his temple. “The idea could work, but I assume you have other frivolous intentions in mind. Do not hide them from me.”

“We used a lot of mana to activate the magic circle, so if we're not allowed inside, I at least want it back. That divine light is pure

mana, right?"

"You are hiding more than just that."

"Ngh..."

How does he know?!

It didn't make any sense. I was wearing the perfect noble facade, but he'd still seen straight through it. Were my intentions showing on my face? I pursed my lips, rubbed my cheeks, and confessed: "I was hoping that absorbing the light would add more of Mestionora's wisdom to my Book. I don't want to wait until I come of age to read it all."

Ferdinand grimaced, knowing full well that I was being honest, but turned his highbeast to face the light. "Erwaermen said the Book was split between us as the result of accidental circumstances. He would not have instructed us to kill each other if such a convenient solution existed, so I sincerely doubt your method will secure you knowledge meant for another."

"You miss every shot you don't take, right? And if this *does* get me more of my Book, then hey, (jackpot). No reason not to try."

"What in the world is a jack of pots? Your language is anything but consistent. Even in our current situation, I cannot allow that to slide."

Right now, who friggin' cares about being ladylike? Seriously.

Despite my internal complaints, I replied only that I would take more care going forward.

Light was raining down from the distant heights. I stood directly underneath it, my newly made cape spread wide to prevent it from reaching the Garden of Beginnings. The Darkness attribute of my divine instrument began absorbing the mana, which rushed into me and replenished all the mana I'd spent. There was none of the pain or discomfort that came from drinking an ultra-nasty rejuvenation potion; in the blink of an eye, I was back to normal.

That said, Ferdinand was right—I'm not getting any of Mestionora's wisdom. Bummer...

"Rucken," I said to dispel the black cape.

"Rejuvenated already?" Ferdinand asked, surprised. The cape would only absorb enough mana for its user to reach their full capacity. It had stopped once I was fully recovered, but still, considering how much mana I'd put into Leidenschaft's spear, this really was a quick turnaround.

I gazed up at Ferdinand. "I didn't get what I really wanted, but

the cape replenished my mana faster than your ultra-nasty potions. Guess I shouldn't have expected anything less from a goddess. Her mana was a feast."

Ferdinand reached out and pinched my cheek. The cold expression on his face told me he had some very strong opinions about the gods. Such thoughts were beyond me.

"Owie..." I muttered. "It really was impressive, but fine—now it's your turn. We need to keep interrupting Gervasio, and you used up a ton of your mana, right? Just have the gods restore it for you. This is a pretty rare opportunity."

Ferdinand must have been capable of repeating the process; he had taught me how to use the cape of Darkness in the first place. But a look of uncertainty arose on his face. "You are the only one who would consider draining mana from the gods," he complained. "Nobody else would dare even attempt it. Despite your regular prayer, I cannot tell whether you are faithful or due for divine punishment."

There was a drawn-out pause before Ferdinand seemed to make up his mind. "I do this only because we cannot risk Gervasio running rampant," he said, then made his own cape of Darkness and spread it underneath the light. He must have felt his mana quickly replenishing because his lips curved into a satisfied grin. "Oho... This is quite something."

Soon enough, the light vanished as suddenly as if someone had flicked a switch, and the magic circle disappeared with it. Ferdinand, whose cape was still spread wide, responded with a contemplative "Hm?"

"I guess they finished," I ventured.

"My mana has yet to fully recover... Perhaps you absorbed too much."

"Umm, what? Are you trying to blame me?" I retorted with a glare. "They were probably almost done when we got here; I don't want to hear any complaints."

"In which case, we should carefully consider our next move." Ferdinand took us up into the air. "If, as you suggest, they were already close to being finished, then Gervasio must be in possession of an almost complete bible. Where is the exit? Or rather, where did you reappear when you accessed the Garden of Beginnings to obtain your Book?"

"I wasn't returned to the library. The exit took me to the

Farthest Hall. Was that not the case for you?”

“No, I went back the way I came. I did not wish to be sent somewhere inconvenient.”

In other words, when Ferdinand got his Book of Mestionora, he not only entered through the ceiling in an especially rude manner but also ignored the exit opened up for him. In truth, that had probably been the right decision; it would have deposited him in the Farthest Hall, requiring him to call upon a member of royalty.

But that's why Erwaermen ended up resenting him.

The knights watching nervously from above must have sensed that we were done—they came racing down on their highbeasts.

“What were you trying to do?” Heisshitze asked. “What was that burst of light?”

“I do not need to answer, nor do I see a reason to. I will not say that again. Now, we must make haste to the Farthest Hall. How are the royals faring? Tell your aub that we wish for him to capture one of them and send them to us. His presence at the royal palace may be necessary for the containment of the Sovereign Knight's Order, but what need is there for the royal family to hang about?”

Such an outrageous request made even Heisshitze recoil in shock. “You want him to *capture* a member of royalty? That does not sound the least bit respectful...”

“They failed to defend themselves even after receiving ample warning of the invasion to come. Then they allowed their own Knight's Order to betray them. Beyond serving as keys to the Farthest Hall, what value do they have now?”

Given the somewhat horrific state of the attack on the royal palace, there was little one could say to argue with Ferdinand. He was telling the cold, hard truth—but some things were best left unspoken.

“You may be right that the royals have been largely useless thus far, but they *did* grant permission for your rescue,” I said. “Try to be a little more polite.”

“I could say the same to you, Lady Rozemyne...” Leonore interjected with a smile.

Heisshitze was in agreement with her. “I can hardly send an ordonnanz of that nature.”

“Is that so?” Ferdinand asked. “I will do it, then. Rozemyne, close your eyes.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and sensed some movement from

Ferdinand. He had presumably taken an ordonnanz feystone and tapped it with his schtappe.

“Prince Anastasius, this is Ferdinand.”

Wait. Come again?

Of all the royals here, why had he chosen to contact Anastasius? I cocked my head, but he continued to speak to his ordonnanz.

“To prevent our Lanzenavian invaders from stealing Yurgenschmidt’s foundation, I need a royal to open the Farthest Hall. As you should know from the aftermath of the civil war, in the event that our enemies succeed, the usurped royals—your family—will immediately be sought out and executed. I would ask that you come immediately and make great haste.” He swung his schtappe, and the ordonnanz took flight. “That should do. Let us proceed to the central building.”

“Lord Ferdinand, why did you contact Prince Anastasius?” Heisshitze asked, speaking for all of us. “The standard procedure would have been to contact King Trauerqual.”

“Is it not obvious?” Ferdinand replied with a smirk befitting the Lord of Evil. “I chose him not only because he can move more freely than any of the other royals, but also because his weakness is the most obvious. Do you think he would choose inaction when Lady Eglantine is at risk of execution?”

Nope.

I’d witnessed more than enough of his lovey-dovey attitude. He wouldn’t sit still when he knew his sweetheart was in danger.

“Still...” I said. “Can’t I just open the door? I may not have the Zent’s approval yet, but I *am* still technically an aub.”

“But what if the Zent’s approval is necessary?” Ferdinand asked casually while directing his highbeast to our destination. “Think of all the time we would waste if we waited until *after* the door failed to open to summon him.”

This guy’s treating royalty as a backup plan!

The Duty of a Zent

As we darted through the forest, Ferdinand instructed that more ordonnanzes be sent out. He intended to reenter the central building through the window we had opened upon our arrival.

“There were Sovereign knights in the hallway outside the dormitories,” Ferdinand explained. “Before we engage them, we should muster whatever forces are available. Heissshitze, contact Dunkelfelger. Cornelius, contact Eckhart and instruct him to bring us more troops.”

Ferdinand then told me to close my eyes again before sending two ordonnanzes of his own. The first went to Strahl—a curt message telling him to stop investigating the Sovereign Knight’s Order so he could reunite with us. The second, which went to Zent Trauerqual, was laden with the long noble euphemisms expected of correspondence with royalty—but no matter how pretty the language seemed, its true meaning was anything but amicable.

“If you have any dignity as a Zent and do not wish to lose Yurgenschmidt’s foundation to a foreigner, clean up the mess at the royal palace, then make your way here with Dunkelfelger and any remaining members of the Sovereign Knight’s Order.”

“Um, Ferdinand...” I said. “What should we do if neither the Zent nor Prince Anastasius comes?”

“Though it will cost us some time and require a detour, we shall come up with an alternative. I admit, I am curious to see how the royals will respond.”

From his voice alone, I could sense that Ferdinand was displeased. He had good reason to be. Anytime a duchy’s foundation was at risk, its aub had a duty to hole up in their foundation’s hall to defend it. The same must have been true for the Zent when the country’s foundation was being threatened. It was just something he had to do.

“You seem annoyed that the Zent is hiding in the palace instead of guarding the foundation,” I observed. “But would someone who does not have the Grutrissheit even know where to find the

foundation?"

Ferdinand smirked at my slight attempt to defend the Zent. "Would it matter? In that case, the best course of action would obviously be to rally the knights and defeat the invaders before they even had a chance to reach the foundation. He should at least be doing *something*. Even you, an underage young woman who despises bloodshed, have joined the battle. How dare someone who claims to be the Zent simply hide away."

"You're overestimating me. This entire time, I've been able to rely on you and my knights, and the unwavering faith I put in your support. If my closest allies suddenly betrayed me—as was the unfortunate case for King Trauerqual—I would never have made it this far." An abrupt act of treason from Hartmut or Cornelius might have stopped me in my tracks before I even reached Ahrensbach.

"This was not some unprecedented occurrence; retainers betray their lords or ladies on a regular enough basis. One must be able to recognize the wolves in sheep's clothing—to pinpoint who in their retinue seems likely to turn coat. From there, one must work to earn their loyalty or remain on guard against them at all times. These are very reasonable expectations."

"But... I don't do any of that..." I said, swallowing hard. The cautious life he had described sounded nothing like my own. At no point since my adoption by the archduke had such a cutthroat attitude seemed necessary for me.

"Of course not," Ferdinand replied. "Karstedt, Elvira, Rihyarda, the archducal couple, and I have vetted every single person allowed to approach you. You are narrow-minded with a penchant for clumsiness—unideal traits for someone who must keep so many secrets—so we handled any potential threats before they could even reach you. I consider it fortunate that you do not have your own Veronica—an obvious and powerful opponent whom you cannot easily dispose of."

Not the nicest way to put it, but... fair enough.

Being denied access to the lower city and only being able to meet with certain people had exhausted me—especially considering that I'd spent each and every day buried under a mountain of work. But now, looking back, I could see just how much my guardians had done to create a safe environment for me. How disappointing that it had taken me this long to realize it...

"So you and my other guardians were protecting me even more

than I noticed...”

“You were valuable enough to warrant it. You introduced paper-making and the printing industry, improved our harvest, and raised our students’ grades. On top of that, you managed to save both Wilfried and Charlotte. We can assume that so much of the Sovereign Knight’s Order turned traitor because the people around the Zent did not appreciate his value, but we have nothing to gain from analyzing how others see him. The fate of everyone in Yurgenschmidt will depend only on what we do moving forward.”

Ferdinand continued as we descended into the trees, “I will not submit to the rule of a man who controls others through royal decrees and then shirks his own duties when his country is in danger. If this is his plan—to stay hidden and allow Lanzenave to take control—then he is a failure of a Zent whether he obtains the Grutrissheit or not.”

His tone was ice-cold, and the venom in his words flowed more freely than usual. His extreme distaste for those who wielded the authority of their station but neglected their duties had not changed since his push for Wilfried to be disinherited. At this rate, his tendrils would drag the Zent straight down into hell.

Eep... Stay strong, Trauerqual!

We were still waiting in the forest when Heissshitze received an ordonnanz from Aub Dunkelfelger. He relayed the message to us.

“Our knights are making decent progress with the Sovereign Order. As for defending the country’s foundation, the aub intends to leave that to Lady Rozemyne, the wielder of the Grutrissheit.”

“Ridiculous,” Ferdinand retorted. “Protecting the foundation is the duty not of Ahrensbach but of the royal family. Make sure he knows that he cannot simply dump this task on another.”

Resolving the chaos within the Sovereign Knight’s Order was no easy feat—even for Aub Dunkelfelger. He was having a hard enough time figuring out which of the knights were his enemies, and since he couldn’t just kill them, he had elected to imprison them all as they reared their heads.

So they’re just going around capturing everyone? That... doesn’t surprise me.

I could only imagine the mess the royal palace must have been facing. The battle there wasn’t even close to being over, and the knights on our side had no reinforcements to spare. Ferdinand

couldn't help but grimace as he listened to the report.

"Lord Ferdinand. We apologize for the delay."

Eckhart and Strahl soon reunited with us. The former had stood guard outside the library while the latter searched the central building. Eckhart explained that he had stationed two scouts in full view of the library so they could inform us if anyone approached. Then it came time for Strahl to give his report.

"The Sovereign knights guarding the dormitories headed toward the auditorium after receiving an ordonnanz from somewhere to the south. We counted eight knights in total, but the door to the auditorium was opened from within, so there are bound to be more."

The door to the Farthest Hall was in the auditorium. There were enemies waiting at our destination.

Strahl continued, "The Sovereign guards' move to the auditorium coincided with our Dunkelfelger allies' arrival at the royal palace. We should conclude that our movements are being relayed to the enemy." He advised us not to take any knights away from the Adalgisa villa for fear that our prisoners would immediately be rescued.

Ferdinand agreed. "The Lanzenavians were simply not used to their schtappes; most of them have more mana than the majority of the knights we brought with us. We must not allow them to be freed, lest they become an enormous threat to us all."

"Understood."

Strahl got to work sending instructions to the villa. Amid the darkness, I saw an ordonnanz fly to the central building.

"Eckhart, use this magic tool to search for the scouts watching us," Ferdinand said. "They already seem to have some grasp of our movements, but we cannot allow them to learn when we intend to launch our surprise attack. Approach them using not your highbeast but physical enhancements."

"Lord Ferdinand, do you have another tool we could give to Angelica?" Eckhart asked. "We could finish this sooner if we work together."

Ferdinand nodded and gave a second tool to Angelica, who immediately set out with Eckhart. They looked as though they were soaring as they shot from branch to branch and eventually disappeared into the foliage.

"Wow, they're fast..." I said. "What were those magic tools?"

“They mainly serve to decrease body weight and silence any noises their wearer would produce. Eckhart and Angelica should eliminate the scouts and return soon enough. Use that time to memorize your next course of action.”

Ferdinand was giving us all instructions and working to fortify our position when an ordonnanz from the central building arrived. “This is Trauerqual,” it said.

The air grew thick with tension. The Zent only ever sent direct ordonnanzes to aubs or Sovereign nobles during the Archduke Conference; that he was contacting us now meant the situation really must have been dire. The small white bird demanded our full attention.

The message that followed was slightly euphemistic but easy to summarize: “As I do not have the Grutrissheit, I cannot be considered the Zent. Yurgenschmidt will collapse without a true king or queen, so I pray that one will arise.” In other words, he had no intention of opposing Gervasio or the Lanzenavians. Our plea for assistance had fallen on deaf ears.

Ngh... How is Ferdinand going to react to this?

Scared though I was, I turned to look at him. His eyes were narrowed into slits, but I could still see their color changing as he took some manner of magic tool in a white-knuckle grip.

“Oh?” Ferdinand said. “So he refuses to defend the foundation because he is a false Zent. He does not care who takes control as long as they have a Grutrissheit. Heissshitze, was that how it sounded to you?”

“Well, um... Yes. If someone obtains the Grutrissheit, he will relinquish the throne to them, no matter who they may be...”

“I see. Then I was not mistaken.”

I’m so scared. Like, that look could seriously kill. And is that a haze of mana surrounding him...?

Ferdinand was so outraged that his mana had started to leak out. In the darkness, it looked as though his entire body were shining. The knights all swallowed at this unmistakable display of anger; he was unconsciously Crushing everyone—though only slightly—and the tension in the air made it hard to breathe.

“Ferdinand,” I said, “why don’t we calm down a little? You’re leaking mana and Crushing us all. You are right to be annoyed, but King Trauerqual was not wrong in saying that a true Zent must have the Grutrissheit. How can he perform his duties without one?”

Ferdinand glared at me. His eyes had stopped changing color, but I could sense the uncontrollable rage still swirling within them.

I continued, "King Trauerqual was prepared to surrender the throne even to Lady Detlinde if she obtained the Grutrissheit. He has the resolve to face whatever consequences await him, which deserves some respect."

"Are you dense? Did you hit your head during the fighting?" Ferdinand snapped, his rage now directed at me.

Oh no... I shouldn't have opened my big mouth. Now I'm on the firing line.

"It would be one thing if only the Zent and his family were sacrificed," Ferdinand continued. "But his decision to remain passive risks the entire country being taken over by Lanzenave. 'Respect' does not factor into it; the man is a complete and utter failure of a Zent."

Ferdinand then looked around at the knights. "We reported the Lanzenavians' misdeeds—that they used instant-death poison on those who refused to obey them, that they murdered nobles en masse for their feystones, and that they kidnapped young women to send to Lanzenave, to name a few. I imagine many of your families were impacted as well. We all saw the havoc Gervasio wrought upon Ahrensbach; imagine what he will do with the entire country under his control. The very fact that King Trauerqual would refuse to save Yurgenschmidt from wide-scale slaughter proves he is a failure of a Zent. Am I wrong?"

His audience largely comprised Ahrensbach knights who had seen the Lanzenavians murder innocent civilians, and those from Dunkelfelger who had arrived to stop the slaughter. They all nodded in response, as did my guard knights.

"We have with us the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, who was given the Grutrissheit to decree a new Zent; Yurgenschmidt will obtain a true king or queen as soon as Gervasio is dealt with. Even after hearing as much from Aub Dunkelfelger, King Trauerqual chose to do nothing. Such a foolish person cannot be permitted to call themselves the Zent."

The knights nodded again, but more hesitantly this time. Ferdinand was openly rejecting their king.

"Do you want other duchies to face the same tragedy as Ahrensbach?" he asked.

"No!" the knights declared.

“Do you consider Gervasio fit to rule Yurgenschmidt?”

“No!”

“Shall we respect the Zent’s decision and allow chaos to swallow our country whole?”

“NO!”

“Then let us *ignore* his response and devote ourselves to taking down Gervasio—whether he has the Grutrissheit or not!”

“SIR, YES SIR!”

Eckhart soon returned with Angelica. “We succeeded in eliminating the scouts,” he said. “There were no guards stationed inside, so we can use the auditorium’s front entrance—a much easier alternative than trying to climb through its windows.” As far as the knights were concerned, leaping out of a window and then making one’s highbeast in midair was simple. Doing the process in reverse—that is, leaping through a window *from* one’s highbeast—was far more challenging.

And of course, both are completely beyond me.

“I do not like the thought of using the front entrance, as it renders us easy to detect and somewhat unprotected...” Ferdinand mused. “But given that Strahl advised the same, I suppose it must be our safest option.”

And so we reentered the central building, all the while keeping a very close eye on our surroundings. Though I worried we might fall victim to an ambush, not a single person stood in our way. Just as the reports had said, the Sovereign knights had retreated into the auditorium.

Using only his hands, Ferdinand instructed the knights to move to their assigned positions, all while keeping an eye on the hallway that connected to the dormitories. I’d attended the meeting during which they’d devised their plan, but I didn’t know what most of the hand signals meant; my only roles were to form Schutzaria’s shield in front of the door and to heal anyone who got hurt.

I was drawn from my thoughts by footfalls; a group had arrived near the far end of the hallway. The knights readied their weapons as out came... Anastasius. As one would expect of a prince, there were guards surrounding him. I was shocked to see how quickly he had come here.

Ferdinand, in contrast, wasn’t surprised in the slightest. He signaled the knights not to make a sound.

Anastasius looked at us, then at the door to the auditorium. “You asked me to come *posthaste* to the Farthest Hall, did you not? Why are you all waiting outside?”

“We cannot reach the Farthest Hall without first eliminating the enemies within. Prince Anastasius—please wait until we finish our assault.”

“Ferdinand, how much do you know about—? Hmm?” The prince must not have noticed me before, because he suddenly blinked at me in confusion. “Who are you?”

“It is I, Rozemyne,” I declared. “It has been too long.”

“Ro—?!” Anastasius clapped a hand over his mouth, having likely remembered that we were trying to be quiet. He shook his head several times, then started to wilt. “Hildebrand and Sigiswald told me your growth was unbelievable. But to think you changed this much...”

“Rozemyne’s growth has no relevance to our current situation,” Ferdinand interjected. “Please save whatever you wish to say for later.” He readied his weapon, then raised a hand.

We could not see Strahl and the others from where we were, but they had just received the signal they were waiting for. In a matter of seconds, several explosions rang out from inside the auditorium as they began their surprise attack.

“What are you doing?!” Anastasius barked. “Stop them!”

Ferdinand did no such thing. Instead, in a steady voice, he replied, “Another force of ours just threw magic tools—tools made by Hartmut—through the auditorium’s topmost windows.”

“An attack on the Royal Academy is an attack on the Zent! Do you *want* to be tried for treason?!”

Ferdinand calmly held up a magic tool. “You are gravely mistaken, Prince Anastasius. We sent an ordonnanz to the Zent asking him to lead an army to protect the foundation, but he refused. In his words, he would allow even a foreigner to take over as long as they had the Grutrissheit. Listen.”

The magic tool repeated the message we had just received from King Trauerqual. Anastasius paled upon hearing it.

“Yurgenschmidt does not have a Zent willing to protect its foundation,” Ferdinand continued, hammering home his point. “Thus, there is no such thing as treason. There cannot be a rebellion against a Zent who does not exist.”

Worried that Ferdinand was being *too* disrespectful, I moved to

stand between him and the prince. “Ferdinand takes issue with useless people who refuse to do their jobs, so your father’s response made him especially angry. But if you ask me, King Trauerqual is a man deserving of respect.”

Anastasius gave me a dubious look, wary of what I might say next.

I gave him a reassuring smile. “After all, for him to have surrendered the throne to a foreign power, he must be ready for his whole family to face the consequences. That takes courage.”

The prince merely stared at me, his eyes wide as saucers. That was good; I certainly wasn’t going to let up on him.

“Prince Anastasius—you said we might be charged with treason for protecting the foundation. Are you in agreement with King Trauerqual, then? As you know, the Lanzenavians used poison to kill anyone who opposed them in Ahrensbach and attempted to kidnap young noblewomen to send back to their country. If given the chance, it stands to reason that they will repeat this process all across Yurgenschmidt. The king’s decision will mean quite a bleak future for Lady Eglantine, so if you really have resolved to support him, I will applaud your courage as well.”

Anastasius’s face twitched. “Rozemyne, you—”

“Rozemyne, cease this chatter and make the shield,” Ferdinand interrupted, holding his weapon at the ready. He looked around one last time, then spurred us all into action with a vertical chop of the hand.

Our knights threw open the door to the auditorium and rushed inside. I put whatever Anastasius had wanted to say out of my mind and created Schutzaria’s shield, securing a safe place for our forces.

“Oh, and if you *do* stand with the Zent,” I added with a smile, “I would advise you to return to your villa. You would not want to get caught up in our treason. Or would you rather join our fight against Lanzenave to protect Lady Eglantine? You might be interested to know that Ferdinand recognizes me as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora—someone capable of crowning new Zents.”

“Come again?” Anastasius yelped. His guards were exchanging looks of concern. “If you have a Grutrissheit to give, then we already have a true Zent—you!”

The prince’s observation caused a stir. Wasn’t it more than a little late to be drawing false conclusions? First and foremost, I considered it necessary to ask what the heck was wrong with the

royal family's information network.

"No, that isn't quite right. I dyed Ahrensbach's foundation and therefore stand as its aub. For me to be a true Zent, I would need to have dyed the country's foundation. Was there no report about—?"

I was going to ask whether he even knew what I got up to in Ahrensbach, but he interrupted me with a sharp glare. "In that case, go see my father immediately. Give him the Grutrissheit and declare *him* the Zent. He would never have made such a weak, defeated statement with a legitimate claim to the throne. You don't know the lengths he goes to each day to carry out his duties! How he's always drinking rejuvenation potions and spending his every spare moment at the shrines!"

I mean, I did notice how heavily he reeked of rejuvenation potions. I remembered it from my dealings with Ferdinand. I also appreciated all the work he was doing to keep the country stable. But what good would giving him the Grutrissheit do? His spirit is already broken, so won't it just drive him into even more of a corner?

If the man was so overcome with despair that he was ready to let his entire family die, then it was best to keep the Grutrissheit away from him. Letting him have it would mean forcing him to continue serving as the Zent. In his current state, he wouldn't be able to stomach that burden. Moreover, the magic tool Grutrissheit made by Ferdinand would survive only a single generation. I couldn't promise to give it to Trauerqual—not when he was at the end of his rope and, at least according to Ferdinand, an absolute failure of a Zent.

"Indeed, I do not know how the king spends his days," I said. "I only heard that message from him."

"You act cold, but do you really not care what might happen to Eglantine?" Anastasius asked, his eyes narrowed in displeasure. "Do you not consider her a friend?"

I stared at him quizzically. It had occurred to me way back when Eglantine forced me to circle the shrines that the two of us would never truly be friends, at least not by my standards. She had thrown me under the bus at the slightest inconvenience, so why was Anastasius surprised that I was treating her the same way?

"I care to some degree, but I mostly find this strange. You and Lady Eglantine taught me that royals 'negotiate' with their friends by taking someone dear to them hostage and then forcing them to comply. Or am I somehow mistaken?"

I sincerely doubt it. They did the same thing with Ferdinand when they made him choose between killing Sylvester to become the next Aub Ehrenfest and marrying Detlinde. Noble common sense sure can be a headache.

The prince looked stunned. There was bitterness on his face; then he cast his eyes down. “Still, for the sake of our country’s future, you should give someone that Grutrissheit. We need a true Zent now more than ever.”

“Pray tell, how can you harp on about prioritizing Yurgenschmidt over personal circumstances when even the king has chosen to abandon it? He actively refused to protect the foundation with us. I refuse to make anyone who would do such a thing the next Zent.” Their decisions to prioritize Ahrensbach over Ehrenfest and to adopt me into the royal family had apparently been for the sake of preserving Yurgenschmidt, so why couldn’t they step up to defend it now that a real emergency was on our hands?

“Fine.” Anastasius drew his weapon and glanced at his knights. “If my father refuses, then I shall do battle in his stead.”

Having a royal on our side would naturally help our cause, and this *was* the right thing for a prince to be doing... but should it not have been Sigiswald giving us his support? Was it really okay for Anastasius to stand out like this?

Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. Any royal will do for our purposes.

“Prince Anastasius, be sure to cover your mouth with cloth,” I said. “Our opponents are very likely to use Lanzenave’s poison.”

The prince and his guard knights covered their mouths, then leapt into the auditorium. The door swung shut behind them.

The Battle for the Auditorium

I watched the door to the auditorium and the ordonnances passing through it while my knights stood ready to protect me. Being unable to see what was happening inside made me both uneasy and relieved; I was worried about how everyone was doing but also glad that I wouldn't need to see another massacre like the one that kept reappearing in my nightmares. I clenched a fist in front of my chest and prayed the battle would end soon and without any of our knights needing to give up their lives.

The door opened, and several Ahrensbach knights came rushing out, all wearing harsh expressions. I could tell at a glance that they weren't here to announce our victory. Rather, they had fallen back because they were wounded. I started tending to them as quickly as I could.

"How are we faring?" I asked.

"There were more Sovereign knights than we expected," the knights explained while drinking rejuvenation potions in the safety of my shield. Our surprise attack with the magic tools had worked well, but many of the Sovereign knights were wearing silver capes, which was making things harder for us.

"We brought manaless weapons in preparation for this scenario, but Prince Anastasius's group did not," another knight added. "They have been taking weapons from our fallen opponents to compensate, but that is of secondary importance. The prince's presence has given some of our enemies pause."

Raublut had apparently instructed the Sovereign knights to "defeat the king's enemies." They hadn't minded doing battle with Ferdinand and the others, but they refused to turn their weapons on Anastasius. It really had swung the battle in our favor.

"Is it possible that trug was used on those individuals?" I asked.

"We cannot tell from appearances alone," one of the knights replied.

"However," another interjected, "Prince Anastasius is furious with the Sovereign knight commander for betraying the Zent. He is

interrogating him as they fight.” The prince was demanding to know why Raublut had turned against them and how long he had been planning his treachery.

“We need to replenish our stock of magic tools and rejuvenation potions, so Lord Ferdinand summoned reinforcements,” a third chimed in. “They should arrive soon.”

The knights rested a little while longer, then left Schutzaria’s shield to return to the battle. I could have joined them, but I would only end up scared and useless, which explained why I was currently on door duty. I would only enter the auditorium when the fighting stopped or when something like instant-death poison required mass healing or purification. Even so, I was desperate to know what was going on in there.

“Just sitting here is making me anxious...” I muttered, looking between the door and a sheet of fey paper that would make my waschen large enough to fill the entire auditorium. We had no way of knowing when our foes might use their poison.

Angelica gave me a nod of understanding. She was stroking Stenluke’s hilt and staring intently at the door to the auditorium.

“Lady Rozemyne, we have brought magic tools and rejuvenation potions,” came a voice.

“Hartmut, Clarissa, and even Justus...?” I muttered. “Should you not be watching the villa?”

“Lord Ferdinand ordered us to come here,” Clarissa declared, sticking her chest out. “It falls to scholars to manage magic tools.”

Hartmut was smiling alongside her.

I started checking the boxes my retainers had arrived with; their contents would need to be distributed to the knights who had used up their rejuvenation potions. But before I could get very far, a massive explosion shook the auditorium. It happened so suddenly that I almost leapt out of my skin.

Wh-What was that...?

It couldn’t have been one of Hartmut’s more violent magic tools—they were far too dangerous to use during such a chaotic battle—which meant the attack must have come from our enemies. I placed a hand on my chest and turned to the door.

“Milady!” Justus shouted. “I will call out if your healing is necessary!” Then he rushed into the auditorium.

I nodded and started instructing my retainers. “Prepare to join the fight. Now that Hartmut and the others are here, we can use our

fey paper.”

My heart raced as I took several sheets from my leather pouch; I would have needed to close my eyes to use a feystone, which would have made my healing far too clumsy. I chose Flutrane’s and Heilschmerz’s magic circles based on the decoration near the edges of their pages, then gripped my schtappe.

Hartmut and Clarissa prepared their own large-scale magic circles, filled their schtappes with mana, and then immediately drank rejuvenation potions. If prepared in advance, fey paper could prove especially useful in battle; it allowed the casting of magic without having to rely on feystones or chants. There were downsides as well, though—it was costly to produce and required a lot of mana to activate. In the case of the latter, the brief moment required to activate it could cost a person their life. It had to be used at exactly the right moment.

Leonore and Matthias stayed in front of me with their shields raised. Angelica and Cornelius gripped their weapons and stood guard, while Laurenz waited outside the auditorium, ready to open the door at a moment’s notice. It had taken only a few seconds for everyone to prepare themselves, but those seconds felt like an eternity.

“Milady! Healing!” Justus called.

“Let’s go, Clarissa!”

“Right!”

Laurenz threw open the door for Angelica and Cornelius, who charged inside to secure the entrance. Clarissa dashed in behind them, moving faster than anyone would expect of a scholar, and started activating her enhancement magic circle. In the dreary darkness of the auditorium—there were far fewer windows inside than in the hallway—her magic circle shone like the sun.

I rushed into the auditorium next, relying on Leonore and Matthias to shield me. In my mind, it was a blistering sprint—but to everyone else, it was probably more of a light jog. It was best not to think too hard about it.

“Lady Rozemyne!” Clarissa called.

I used my schtappe to channel mana into my sheet of paper marked with Flutrane’s magic circle, which caused the circle to turn green. Then I swung my schtappe, launching the circle into Clarissa’s golden one. The two fused, then separated into myriad smaller circles, each of which shot out green sparkles that dyed the

entire auditorium with cleansing light.

“Hartmut!” I shouted as I channeled mana into Heilschmerz’s circle.

“There you are,” he replied while activating his own enhancement magic circle. As it rose up into the air, I shot it with Heilschmerz’s magic circle, which produced the same result as a moment ago; the two circles fused, split apart, and then showered the room in green light.

“What in the world...?”

I noticed several confused voices as the knights stared up at the various magic circles. Though I wasn’t sure what had caused that massive explosion, it must have incapacitated a huge chunk of our force; even more people than expected started rising to their feet as the green light healed them. But the state of the auditorium surprised me even more.

“Huh? This doesn’t make any sense...”

The auditorium could switch between various forms. For some strange reason, it was currently in the form used during the graduation ceremony. I could see the stage where dedication whirls were performed and the altar that led to the Farthest Hall.

I used the glow of the green light to search for anyone I recognized. Someone near the altar must have thrown an explosive magic tool at the entrance; many were still collapsed in a circle around where it had presumably landed. Anastasius and his guard knights were on the ground together, and Eckhart was slumped against the wall on my right. He must have protected Ferdinand, who stood up almost immediately.

“Fer—”

I tried to call out to him, but his eyes shot wide open, and a sudden cry cut me short.

“You there! Die!”

Raublut’s voice echoed through the hall. At the same time, a dazzling wave of rainbow light shot straight toward me.

“Lady Rozemyne!”

“*Geteilt!*”

Angelica, Cornelius, and Ferdinand cried out, and in the blink of an eye, there were shields and knights all around me. I could only watch as the rainbow light slammed straight into our defenses, causing two of the shields from Ferdinand to disappear.

“Raublut...” I muttered.

The large man by the altar was glowering in our direction. He gave his cape a flourish—it was silver, not the pitch black of the Sovereign Knight’s Order—and channeled mana into his blade once again. It shone with a rainbow light that lit up the auditorium. The murderous intent in his eyes sent a shiver down my spine.

“I was sure that tool would dispose of my largest obstruction,” Raublut said, his tone completely flat. “To think there exists such potent healing... You are in my way. Disappear.”

His quiet yet inescapable malice seized me. He wanted me dead. I was so terrified that I couldn’t even move.

“King Gervasio will obtain the Grutrissheit,” the Sovereign knight commander continued. “There is no place in this world for those who would challenge or oppose him.”

Raublut prepared to attack again, but a burst of light stayed his hand. The statues of the gods and their divine instruments were now radiant, and a low rumble shook the auditorium as they started to move. They spun as though performing a dedication whirl as they slid to either side of the altar.

“What?”

“They’re moving?”

The knights looked puzzled, but I could guess what this meant. The statues had shifted during my divine protections ritual, and they had already moved aside by the time I’d emerged atop the altar after obtaining my Book of Mestionora from Erwaermen. The mosaic wall would open at any moment.

Gervasio’s coming.

I wasn’t the only one who had realized what was about to happen; Ferdinand wore a grim expression as an opening appeared in the far wall. The knights gazed up at the altar in silence.

“Here he comes!” Raublut declared. “King Gervasio, the true Zent chosen by the gods!” His voice betrayed a maddening obsession, which elicited a few despairing looks from the knights. They had just seen the statues move and the altar open up like the gods themselves were welcoming our enemy.

I wouldn’t blame someone for thinking this meant he was chosen by the gods.

“That is the entrance to the Garden of Beginnings. Nothing more,” I said, hoping to clear up any misunderstandings before they could take root. “One goes there when obtaining their schtappe or divine protections. I passed through the same opening after I was

granted my Book of Mestionora.”

“Lady Rozemyne?!”

“Lady Eglantine also accessed the Garden of Beginnings when she obtained her schtappe, and anyone who is omni-elemental would have seen the altar open the same way. It is nothing to get so excited about.”

The knights on the verge of celebrating suddenly looked uncertain. My attempt to calm everyone down had succeeded, but I’d made Raublut even more furious in the process. His arms trembled out of anger as he swung his sword at me and screamed, “I will cut you down before King Gervasio returns!”

“Geteilt!”

Shields surrounded me once again. Several were from Ferdinand, though he hadn’t left Eckhart’s side while the weary knight downed a rejuvenation potion. The others were from my retainers—even Hartmut and Clarissa—who had stepped in front of me. They had anticipated the attack this time.

Raublut wasn’t going to back down. He poured more mana into his sword and roared again. “Crush those who would oppose the true Zent! Capture the Saint of Ehrenfest! For the sake of Yurgenschmidt, we will make her serve the Sovereign temple!”

The Sovereign knights surrounding him broke into three rough groups. The one on the left went for Anastasius and his guards, who were outside the range of my healing and still on the ground. But first, they would need to defeat Heisshitze’s knights, who were defending the wounded and distributing rejuvenation potions. The group beside them readied their weapons but stuck close to Raublut.

As for the group on the right, they readied their schtappe bows and quickly began shooting arrows at us.

“Huh?!”

My breath caught in my throat. They were targeting Ferdinand, but his shields were still protecting me. A volley of arrows flew in his direction... and struck the shields of Justus, Eckhart, and the Ahrensbach knights who had all moved to protect him.

“Shields for Lady Rozemyne!” Leonore demanded.

As glad as I was that Ferdinand wasn’t hurt, I couldn’t lose focus. Raublut swung his sword down yet again, and a growing mass of rainbow mana closed in on me.

“Geteilt!”

There was no time to recite the prayer to create Schutzaria's shield. Though the mass of rainbow light smashed through Ferdinand's many defenses, the next few layers were enough to scatter it. I was safe, but Cornelius and Laurenz let out pained grunts from the front line.

"Angelica, Matthias—take the front!" Leonore instructed without missing a beat. "Lady Rozemyne, create a shield of Wind!"

This was the same tactic we had employed during our ditter match against Dunkelfelger: relying on *geteilt* at first, then bringing out Schutzaria's shield. On any battlefield, it was important to have somewhere our knights could stay safe.

"O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all..."

My guard knights rearranged themselves while I chanted the prayer. Laurenz and Cornelius needed to down rejuvenation potions, but the group that had stayed with Raublut was now bombarding us with rainbow bolts of their own. They came in various sizes and were layered so there wouldn't be a single pause in their assault. Laurenz and Cornelius had to hold up their shields before they could drink anything.

Some of our enemies' attacks didn't have much mana in them. Others had *a lot*. They actually hurt now that Ferdinand's shields were out of the picture, but I continued to pray as the last of the *geteilts* absorbed them.

"Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm."

A pillar of yellow light shot into the air, causing the Sovereign knights to cry out in surprise, and Schutzaria's domed shield appeared around us with a metallic *snap*. Our enemies' mana attacks wouldn't breach this defense. My knights started to relax now that they weren't being overwhelmed anymore.

"Stay on your guard and drink your potions quickly!" Leonore said, narrowing her indigo eyes at Raublut and his allies. "We are up against the Sovereign Knight's Order, not mere apprentices of the Royal Academy!"

Though the civil war had devastated the noble population and dealt a heavy blow to the quality of the country's knights, the Sovereign Order still comprised the very best Yurgenschmidt could provide. My knights were considered some of the strongest students in their grades, but they wouldn't stand a chance against veterans like Karstedt and Bonifatius. Our current opponents had plenty of

experience as well, so defeating them wouldn't be easy.

"We should aim to reunite with Lord Ferdinand," Leonore continued. "But right now, both our forces appear to be pinned down."

As well as a volley of arrows, Ferdinand and his knights were having to endure a slew of magic tools being thrown at them. Explosions rang out above their heads, and mana-immune silver needles shot in every direction, making things especially tough for them. The tools had come from Lanzenave, I assumed.

"Lady Rozemyne," Leonore said. "Maintaining the shield is your top priority—I understand that—but would you be able to heal Prince Anastasius's group? If we can return them to the battle, the scales should tip in our favor."

I couldn't deny Anastasius's value in this fight; some of our opponents refused to attack a prince, and the guards in his service were Sovereign knights. By healing him and his force, I would return them all to the battle and free up the Dunkelfelger knights stuck tending to their wounds.

Helping them is our best move, but...

I paused, able to feel the barrage of rainbow slashes hammering against my shield, and then nodded. "I will do my best. But at the same time, I would advise you all to raise your shields; our opponents seem to be focusing their attacks on a single spot. That, or their blows are stronger and more impactful than any that have hit my defenses before."

After confirming that my knights had their shields raised, I squeezed my eyes shut and made Flutrane's staff. A proper chant would work better than a magic circle on a sheet of paper, which could only heal within a predetermined range. The problem was that the prayer was lengthy and required a certain degree of safety to perform.

"O Goddess of Healing Heilschmerz, of the Goddess of Water Flutrane's exalted twelve, hear my prayers..."

I poured mana into Flutrane's staff. Ferdinand's group would probably need to be healed as much as Anastasius's.

"Lend me your divine power and grant me the power to heal those who have been hurt..."

"Matthias, Angelica!" Cornelius cried out, almost interrupting me. My eyes were closed, so I couldn't see what was going on, but I must have recoiled a little; Leonore yelled a reminder that I needed

to focus. My throat bobbed in fear of the unknown, and my voice started to crack. It was hard to keep praying when my heart was pounding and my entire body was trembling.

“Play the divine melody and cast the blissful ripples of your pure divine protection.”

No sooner had the last words passed my lips than I dispelled the staff and opened my eyes. An enemy knight standing in front of Schutzaria’s shield struck Cornelius so hard that he was blown away.

“Wh-What is going on?!” I exclaimed.

“The Sovereign knights closed the distance during their barrage and then attempted to breach our shield as soon as you started your prayer,” Leonore replied. “Matthias, Angelica, and Cornelius are fighting them.”

I hadn’t felt anyone breach the shield, but I could see parts of our opponents’ silver cloth and weapons slip through as the fight continued. If we allowed any of them to pass through the barrier, my knights would be powerless to stop them. Any acts of violence would see them blown out of the shield, like Judithe when Lestilaut managed to get inside.

“Out of my way!” Clarissa roared. “No one’s disrespecting the Avatar of Mestionora on my watch!” She leapt around the battlefield and threw a magic tool at the enemies in front of our shield. It exploded right in their faces, releasing red powder that caused the knights to choke, clutch their faces, and start rolling around on the floor. It must have been negarosh.

Matthias and Angelica took advantage of the chaos to attack with their non-schtappe weapons.

“Clarissa! Use these next!” Hartmut called, tossing her various tools. “Don’t give them any openings!”

“Leave it to me!” Clarissa shouted in response, a proud grin across her face as she watched the suffering knights. Something told me the two of them would take care of anyone who tried to break through our shield.

I turned to look at Raublut, who was busy instructing his knights. He hadn’t moved a single step away from the altar they were guarding.

Judithe could have hit him from here.

I bit my lip as I eyed the distance between us. It hurt so much that Judithe hadn’t been able to come with us due to being

underage.

“Hartmut’s magic tools appear to work against silver equipment,” Leonore observed. “Matthias, Angelica, step back for now. Laurenz and I will take the front.”

Matthias and Angelica did as instructed and moved to the back of our group. Hartmut gave them rejuvenation potions, and they settled down beside me.

“To be honest, I thought your blessings would make this fight a whole lot easier than this...” Matthias said despairingly. He glared at the Sovereign knights and drank his potion. “I never expected their experience to give them such an edge. It feels like we’re up against an army of Lord Bonifatiuses.”

I shook my head at his assumption. “Matthias, we aren’t the only ones the gods are willing to support. Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger showed the entire country how to obtain blessings; the Sovereign Knight’s Order might already have incorporated them.”

Ehrenfest’s Order had learned from Dunkelfelger’s ritual and used it during the last Lord of Winter hunt. The royals and their retainers attended the Interduchy Tournament, so it wouldn’t be at all strange for the Sovereign Knight’s Order to have performed a ritual presented there as research.

“Should we use the ritual of the Goddess of Oceans?” I muttered. Perhaps we could gain an advantage by returning everyone’s blessings to the gods and then reapplying our own. It seemed worthwhile as long as we could prevent the Sovereign knights from performing their own ritual.

“Lady Rozemyne! We are ready to provide our support!” Heisshitze called the moment I created my schtappe. Anastasius’s group had recovered and rejoined the fight, which would give us some very important leeway.

But my relief lasted only for a moment.

“Crush them before they reunite!” Raublut shouted, instructing everyone to focus their attacks on us while stalling Heisshitze with a burst of rainbow mana. “They are most vulnerable when they are apart!”

I wish they were a little weaker, but... this can still work.

Praying that Heisshitze’s group would safely rejoin the rest of our forces, I made my schtappe, drew the Goddess of Oceans’ sigil, and then used streitkolben to turn my schtappe into a staff.

“O Goddess of Oceans Verfuheremeer...”

I swung my staff, and the crashing of waves interrupted the din of battle.

“What is she doing?! Stop her!”

“Everything feels so heavy now!”

“At least warn us!”

Troops on both sides of the battle had been using blessings to bolster themselves, and many stumbled when that power was suddenly taken from them. I pushed through the angry shouts and continued to pray.

“To the gods who granted us their blessings, with our gratitude and prayers, we offer our mana.”

I thrust Verfuhrmeer’s staff up into the air—and with an especially loud crash, a pillar of light shot toward the ceiling.

That should do it. Now I just need to reapply blessings to our own troops.

I returned my schtappe to normal and opened my eyes. The auditorium was still; any enthusiasm for the battle had been sucked away with the gods’ blessings. It was the perfect chance to start praying... but before I could even open my mouth, a strange force seemed to weigh down on me, like an imposing foe had suddenly appeared. I started scanning the room, which prompted Leonore to ask if something was wrong.

“I feel something strange...” I replied, then pointed to the top of the altar. “An overwhelming kind of pressure... coming from *up there*.”

One Man's Return from the Garden of Beginnings

A man sauntered slowly between the statues of the supreme gods, then stopped. It had to be Gervasio; nobody else would have come from atop the altar. I couldn't see him very clearly from where we were, so I enhanced my vision.

Is that... an older, silver-haired Ferdinand?! Or does he look more like Erwaermen?

Our new arrival appeared to be comfortably in his forties and wore his long silver hair back. He really did remind me of an older Ferdinand. The two looked so alike that one wouldn't even need to ask to know they were related. If not for my knowledge of the Adalgisa villa, I might have assumed that Gervasio was Ferdinand's much older brother, uncle, or even father.

Gervasio stared down at us from the altar, then turned to his main ally. "What in the world is happening here, Raublut?" He must have been waiting for the clamor of our battle to die down. His deep voice, befitting a commander, carried through the entire auditorium, demanding everyone's attention.

"Aah, King Gervasio!" Raublut threw up his hands and continued in a somewhat performative tone, "I beg of you, reveal your gods-given Grutrissheit here for all to see! Show everyone you have become a true Zent!"

Gervasio extended an arm and chanted, "*Grutrissheit.*" A bible the same shape as Mestionora's divine instrument appeared in his hand. That he was standing between the statues of the supreme gods made him look even more like a proper Zent.

"Before us stands a true Zent chosen by the gods!" Raublut declared, brimming with emotion. "The man who will save our country!"

Anastasius and his guards paled. Some of the Sovereign knights erupted in maniacal cheers. But most of the noise came from those looking between Ferdinand and Gervasio.

“Lady Rozemyne... is that Gervasio?” Leonore asked.

“I would assume so. Raublut said it was, at least.”

“He and Lord Ferdinand are related, are they not...?”

“They look very similar, so yes, I would assume they are connected in one way or another. But remember, Leonore—Ferdinand is a member of Ehrenfest’s archducal family.” As far as the public was concerned, I didn’t know anything about his background or the Adalgisa villa. I put on a smile and said, “In any case, his appearance is irrelevant. It does not change what we must do.”

My eyes didn’t move from Gervasio, who was still standing atop the altar. If we let him become the Zent, who knew what he would do to me for stealing Ahrensbach’s foundation, to Ferdinand for getting in the way of his plans, and to Ehrenfest as a whole for killing their ally Georgine?

We should assume that negotiating is out of the question.

The Lanzenavians had already shown their readiness to eliminate anyone who tried to stop them; I doubted they would treat us any better. Gervasio’s men would come in force to steal back Ahrensbach’s foundation, and there was no reason to believe they would spare me; I’d already demolished plenty of their troops, destroyed their ships, freed the women they had kidnapped, and subjugated the Adalgisa villa. If someone had done all that to me and imprisoned everyone in my estate, I wouldn’t have been able to forgive them no matter their reasons.

“Indeed, his appearance does not matter,” Leonore replied. Her eyes darted all around the auditorium as she watched the Sovereign knights. “That said, how will we capture him? The knight commander hasn’t moved from the altar. We will need to defeat his Order or launch an attack that can reach beyond them. If we could secure ourselves more troops or find a way to communicate with those outside...”

Something slapped against my wrist. A fey paper airplane. It was a peculiar sight, to be sure, but I quickly recognized it as a message. I made sure to keep a close eye on those around me as I unfolded it, revealing a hastily written note from Ferdinand.

“Use your Grutrissheit and extravagant blessings to draw everyone’s attention. Verdrenna will obstruct the enemy. My side is ready.”

In other words, he wanted me to create a distraction. I discreetly moved the note so that my knights could see it. Leonore

glanced at Ferdinand, while Hartmut and Clarissa reached for the pouches containing their fey paper.

I shot my right hand up into the air and shouted, “*Grutrissheit!*” My own Book of Mestionora appeared moments later.

“What?! Another *Grutrissheit!*?”

“No, look closely! Hers is too small to be genuine! King Gervasio has the real one!”

“What are you talking about?! *Lady Rozemyne’s Grutrissheit* is the real one! She opened country gates with it!”

I still needed to reapply the blessings I’d stolen, so I did my best to block out the arguments between the knights of Dunkelfelger and the Sovereignty. Angriff the God of War, Schlagziel the God of Hunting, Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale, Duldsetzen the Goddess of Endurance, Greifechan the Goddess of Luck... I prayed to them all, one by one. Each time, divine light shot up into the air before raining down on my allies.

“Lady Rozemyne has received the blessings of countless gods,” Hartmut declared, not even attempting to mask his pride. “As the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, she has been tasked with bestowing the *Grutrissheit* upon the next Zent. She will choose a worthy candidate from among the people of Yurgenschmidt. There is no need for an intruder from Lanzenave to take the throne.”

Hartmut?!

I wasn’t done giving blessings, so I couldn’t do anything to stop him, and my retainers were so used to his drawn-out speeches that he was little more than background noise to them. Their focus was entirely elsewhere. As for everyone else, they were watching Hartmut in a total daze. We had successfully created a distraction.

“As I thought, relegating her to the Sovereign temple will not be enough,” Raublut spat, now wearing a murderous glare. “I must kill her with my own hands.”

“Rozemyne’s retainer is correct—we have no reason to let some foreign menace take the throne!” Anastasius declared. He and his retainers had returned to their senses. “Raublut! You betrayed my father, Yurgenschmidt, and everyone who put their faith in you as the Sovereign knight commander! I shall have your head!”

The prince and his retinue were also on the receiving end of my blessings; they had no trouble knocking aside the Sovereign knights in their path as they advanced on Raublut.

“Ah, of course. It slipped my mind that the gods answer

blessings here...” Gervasio muttered, impressed, as he regarded the pillars of light now dotting the auditorium. He held up his bible as if mimicking me, then started to pray in his low, reverberating voice. “O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted twelve...”

Gervasio’s bible shone with blue light. I couldn’t believe how easily he had succeeded. When I first started as an apprentice shrine maiden, learning the prayers for religious ceremonies had been arduous and immensely time-consuming. The gods’ names were so long and all over the place that I remembered wanting to give them all nicknames out of exasperation.

“Hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength,” Gervasio said. “Grant me the power to smite those who would oppose us.”

A sharp noise rang out as a pillar of blue light shot up into the air. Cheers of adoration arose from Raublut’s knights as Anastasius’s group was stopped in its tracks.

“Hmm. It would appear the gods grant me their blessings as well...” Gervasio said with a smile as he gazed up at the blue pillar. He then started to layer on exactly the same prayers as me, starting with Steifebrise. The advantage we’d secured through the Goddess of Oceans’ ritual was about to be undone.

Worse still, everyone’s gone back to looking at Gervasio. What is Ferdinand even doing?!

Hadn’t he intended to do something while everyone was staring at me? I turned to look at him, but he was nowhere to be seen; I saw only Eckhart fighting back some of the Sovereign knights.

“Hear my— Mmph?!”

Gervasio was interrupted mid prayer by a sudden burst of mana. Several of his charms popped in response.

“Where did that come from?!” Raublut exclaimed. He had been focusing on Anastasius’s group while defending the altar but spun around, his weapon raised, to see where the counterattacks from Gervasio’s charms were headed.

“*Geteilt.*”

A shield appeared close to the top of the altar. It blocked the attacks from Gervasio’s charms, then vanished to reveal none other than Ferdinand. I didn’t know how he’d managed to make it up there, but I could guess that he’d used Verbergen’s charm while everyone was staring at me.

“You!” Raublut shouted. “When did you get there?!”

Ferdinand didn't even look at the knight commander; his eyes were focused on Gervasio. He formed a new shield in one hand—a standard technique for knights—and a black water gun in the other, then unleashed a barrage of unrelenting attacks.

“King Gervasio!”

Raublut tried to ascend the altar to intervene, but Clarissa shouted, “Oh no you don't!” and activated another of her wide-area magic circles. We had already been told to obstruct the enemy with Verdrenna, so I readily swung my schtappe at the fey paper Hartmut had spread out for me.

“Verdrenna's lightning!” I shouted.

Magic circles spread out near the ceiling before raining lightning down on the Sovereign Knight's Order. At the same time, another magic circle activated—one put in place by Ferdinand, I assumed—and more lightning fell on the Sovereign knights Eckhart and our Ahrensbach troops were fighting. Cries of agony filled the auditorium, and the wounded knights' charms fired counters at the circles.

Raublut roared at his troops to use their silver capes to negate the lightning. He threw his own cape over his head to demonstrate, but when he attempted to charge toward Gervasio a second time...

“Ngh!”

Raublut toppled over. I thought it must have been an attack, but apparently not; he reached out a hand and muttered, “What is this? An invisible barrier?!” Not even his silver cape had gotten him through it.

The knight commander was furious to have been denied the privilege of climbing the altar, but I was relieved; as long as he stayed where he was, Ferdinand wouldn't need to worry about enemy reinforcements. It was hard to imagine him losing a duel against Gervasio when the man wasn't even a knight.

“So you *are* Quinta, then...”

Ferdinand took aim and fired straight at Gervasio's face. His brow didn't so much as twitch, but the fury behind the attack made it clear that he wasn't willing to discuss the matter.

Gervasio briskly raised an arm to intercept the shot. Another of his charms popped and launched a counterattack, which Ferdinand simply blocked with his shield.

My own gun had reminded me of a mere toy... but the one Ferdinand was using looked indistinguishable from the real thing.

Thin lines of mana blasted Gervasio, bursting his charms in quick succession. He was dispatching them with weak shots so their counterattacks wouldn't do too much damage.

"*Rucken. Geteilt*," Gervasio said, dispelling his Grutrissheit and producing a shield as Ferdinand continued to destroy his charms. "Raublut and Leonzio were correct... We look shockingly alike."

Ferdinand threw a magic tool in lieu of a response. It went over Gervasio's raised shield and exploded behind him; there was only so much a normal square shield could achieve when one was fighting alone without guard knights. Gervasio had charms for physical attacks as well, so another counter shot out, but Ferdinand once again blocked it.

"Quinta, do you feel no remorse over the circumstances of your birth?" Gervasio asked quietly. "Have you never felt enraged that such a miserable life was forced upon you? Do you think nothing of Lanzenave's customs or the fact that you were destined to have a cruel upbringing before you were even born?"

Ferdinand must have had strong thoughts on the matter, but he maintained a stony facade and silently threw a second magic tool. Gervasio blocked it with his shield and continued.

"The boys born in that villa are judged purely by their mana, and those who are to become feystones can never escape that fate. Even those registered into the royal branch family are sent to a foreign country upon coming of age, where they live only to maintain its ivory buildings. This, Quinta... This is the only opportunity we might ever have to end this vicious cycle. Once I take control as the next Zent of Yurgenschmidt, I will put a stop to the madness. No children will be born into that misery. And this country will no longer be subject to the whims of a king who lacks the Grutrissheit."

Ferdinand gave a scornful chuckle. "You appear to be mistaken. I am not Quinta; I am Ferdinand, an Ehrenfest archduke candidate."

"You may not remember the villa, which you left at such a young age, but you escaped only because your mother became a feystone in your place. And to take *her* place, a girl who was supposed to live as a princess was instead..."

Ferdinand must have been furious. He wasn't letting it show, but he wore the same fake smile I saw whenever he was extremely displeased. "As I said, I am not Quinta. I am Ferdinand."



“You have your reasons. I understand that,” Ferdinand continued, his glittering smile belying his true feelings. “But who are you to lecture me when you accepted those feystones and used them for Lanzenave? You are an intruder from another land. And now that Yurgenschmidt has the Divine Avatar of Mestionora to bestow the Grutrissheit upon a new Zent, it has no need for an agent of chaos. I will say only this to Lanzenave: curse the name Tollkuehnheit and perish. That, too, will spare future generations the fate of being born in the Adalgisa villa.”

“I see... Enough, then. He who abandoned the villa does not understand our pain. You were born to be a feystone, Quinta, and a feystone you shall become.”

Gervasio threw his shield aside and aimed a silver tube at Ferdinand. It must have contained the same kind of poison that Letizia had used. The instant I saw it, my hands moved on their own.

“Waschen!”

We had expected our foes to once again use poison. I raised my schtappe and blasted the fey paper we had prepared in advance.

The Battle atop the Altar

Lanzenave's dangerous stuff can all get washed away!

Even if the silver tube *didn't* contain poison, we had nothing to lose by removing it from the battle. Combining my waschen with an enhancement magic circle had without a doubt been the right move. A deluge of water poured down from the ceiling with all the force of a raging waterfall.

“What is this?!” shouted the Sovereign knights.

“The waschen is swirling!” my own knights cried. “This doesn't make sense!”

We had designed our magic circle with the intention of washing the entire auditorium, so water gradually filled the room. I would simply need to hold my nose and wait for it all to vanish, I thought... but I was sorely mistaken. Perhaps because I'd envisioned a washing machine when summoning the water, it soon turned into a violent whirlpool that swept up my friends as well as my enemies.

“Rozemyne! What is going—?!”

Anastasius began to cry out, but his words devolved into a frantic gurgle as the water took him. I'd also been carried away by the waschen and was now being thrown every which way.

Gyaaaaaaah! I messed up! Someone, save me!

I was lucky that I'd thought to hold my nose; I would already have drowned otherwise. My knights, Raublut, Anastasius, and the Sovereign Order were likewise spinning around and around like clothes in a washing machine. This was completely beyond my expectations.

My head is spinning! I... I can't breathe! Gah!

I tried to scream, but no sound came out. The torrent of water threw me up into the air... and then seemed to vanish, allowing air to fill my lungs. My vision cleared up as well. I wasn't wet at all, and my hair was dangling loosely in front of my eyes.

Huh? The ceiling...

Beyond my tresses—which were as dry as the rest of me—I could see the very top of the auditorium. It was so close that I

thought I might be able to reach out and touch it. Only when I remembered that the water had thrown me skyward did gravity decide to drag me back down. My stomach dropped, and the ceiling became increasingly distant.

I'm falling!

"Eep! Eep, eep, eep!"

Though I was picking up speed, everything around me seemed to move in slow motion. I flailed my arms in a desperate search for something to hold on to, but nothing was within my reach.

Someone grunted in pain below me; then Ferdinand shouted my name in a panic. I couldn't even get my bearings before two of the charms on my wrist burst, counterattacks shot from them, and countless bands of light enveloped me. I was pulled down at a new angle as more than just gravity had its way with me.

I screamed, then realized that someone had caught me. Ferdinand. I could tell it was him because instead of asking whether I was alright, he told me to shut up and demanded to know what I was doing.

"Well, I... I saw Gervasio point a silver tube at you, so I cast waschen. It turned into a whirlpool out of nowhere, then threw me up here."

"Did you truly believe the same trick would work on me twice?" Ferdinand asked with a grimace. He nodded at Gervasio, who was holding his forehead and groaning.

I wished that Ferdinand wouldn't look so displeased with me. I'd acted on instinct; it wasn't like I thought he couldn't manage on his own. My emotions were torn between delight that he was okay and nervousness about the scolding to come.

"A-Anyway... How come only I ended up on the altar?" I asked. "Everyone else is still spinning."

Below us, the auditorium still resembled a giant washing machine. None of the water had reached the altar; the barrier that had rejected Raublut was keeping the raging waves at bay.

My ultimate waschen didn't accomplish anything...

I'd tried to save Ferdinand, but he had already escaped danger on his own. And now I was up on the altar with him, having to endure a lecture. This was just awful.

Bwehhh.

"The answer seems obvious," Ferdinand replied. "You were the only one qualified to ascend the shrine." He put me down, remade

his gun, and then glanced down at the reeling whirlpool. "I am more curious as to why the waschen has not disappeared. What filth were you hoping it would cleanse?"

"Everything dangerous from Lanzenave. I didn't want to chance there being something other than instant-death poison in the silver tube..."

"I see. If trug is considered a dangerous substance, then the waschen would require a little more time." Ferdinand shot at Gervasio to stop him from drinking a rejuvenation potion.

A moment later, the whirlpool vanished, and many of the knights dropped to the floor with a loud, metallic clatter.

"Oh no!" I cried.

"The knights are well trained and wearing armor; they will not die from a mere fall."

"My scholars are among them too, you know!"

"Stop leaning forward. The last thing we need is you falling down with them."

I took a cautious step back, then frantically searched the room for Hartmut and Clarissa. Those who knew about my enhanced waschen from our ditter match seemed relatively calm as they regrouped. Leonore and Cornelius had been thrown up into the air, but they made and mounted their highbeasts before they even came close to being in any danger. Angelica hopped between their wings on her way back to the floor.

"As the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, Lady Rozemyne looks at home atop the altar."

"How absolutely divine! Aaah, the supreme gods...!"

Oh, they seem fine.

Hartmut and Clarissa hadn't been swept too high up into the air and were now pointing at me while clamoring about something or other. It seemed wise to mostly ignore them.

I'm glad they're safe, but I'd rather they shut up a little.

As I scanned the crowd for other capes, Anastasius barked, "At least warn us before you act!" His voice hadn't come from the direction I'd expected, and when I turned to look, I saw a princely figure stuck in the audience seating. He had survived the waschen, at least.

But where's Raublut?

He had been guarding the altar, but now he was gone. I enhanced my vision and tried to spot him among the confusing

mass of silver capes, at which point the doors to the auditorium slammed open.

What now?!

An enormous group wearing blue capes surged into the room. The cavalry was here.

“Support Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne!” Aub Dunkelfelger roared from the vanguard.

“FIIIIIGHT!”

Standing beside the aub was a female knight wearing two capes, a black one layered on top of a blue one. Though she was wearing a helmet, which made her sex harder to ascertain, the shape of her breastplate was a clear giveaway. She looked perfectly comfortable in her fighting stance.

“Raublut,” she began, “you dared to poison King Trauerqual despite serving as his knight commander. For that, you will not be spared my wrath. As his wife, I will strike you down in his stead.”

The female knight immediately managed to pick Raublut out from the crowd—something that had seemed impossible to me—and pointed at him with her weapon. Her cape was black on the outside, signifying her citizenship in the Sovereignty. The way she spoke and stood ready for combat reminded me of Hannelore.

“Is that Lady Magdalena, the king’s third wife...?” I asked.

Ferdinand shot me a look as though I’d asked the most obvious question in the world. “Would any of his other wives have charged into battle alongside Aub Dunkelfelger?”

Marrying the Zent didn’t change her at all. Dunkelfelger sure is, well... exactly as I’d expect by this point.

“Aub Dunkelfelger,” Ferdinand called, blocking several attacks with his shield while continuing to put pressure on Gervasio. “I shall entrust you with capturing Raublut and the Sovereign traitors!”

The size of our army had swelled thanks to our new reinforcements. It seemed perfectly safe to leave the fighting below to Ahrensbach’s and Dunkelfelger’s knights.

“So it shall be done!” the aub declared. “That said... it is still exceptionally hard to distinguish friend from foe. Everyone! Capture those wearing silver or the black capes of the Sovereign Knight’s Order! We can inspect their faces and give them a chance to plead their case later!”

My confidence gave way to concern; the aub was being as crude

yet impactful as usual. In response to his instructions, the blue-capes descended on everyone the waschen had thrown to the ground.

“Ferdinand...” I said. “They might accidentally end up restraining Prince Anastasius’s group. Is that going to be an issue?”

“The imprisonment of Raublut and his faction takes priority. Plus, the knights have Lady Magdalena with them. I imagine we can leave the prince to his own devices.”

Can we really...?

Ferdinand gave a heavy sigh like he had read my mind. “Should you not be more concerned about capturing Gervasio so you can focus on your library city?”

“Wow! You’re absolutely right!”

Anastasius was only here as insurance. I was participating in this battle because it was my duty as the new Aub Ahrensbach to capture the Lanzenavians, but truth be told, I wanted to thrust the whole ordeal onto someone else so I could start working on my library city.

Back in ancient times, Alexandria put herb gardens in its Great Library. I want my city to be just as versatile—a massive library that encompasses the Gutenbergs’ book-making operations, Ferdinand’s laboratories, and my enormous book collection.

Ahrensbach was the perfect location, since it even had its own ocean. But before I could proceed with those plans, I would need to capture or otherwise defeat Gervasio, the Lanzenavians’ leader, and end this conflict.

“Gervasio has more mana than we do, so we can assume our bindings will not work on him,” Ferdinand said. “Focus on defense while I charge my mana.”

“Right!” I squeezed my eyes shut and started to pray: “O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all...”

“You...” Gervasio said. “Your name is Myne, correct?”

My eyes shot open in surprise. Ferdinand shouted at me to focus on the prayer and continued to assail Gervasio with bullets.

“O twelve goddesses who serve by her side...”

“Myne, why are you cooperating with Quinta instead of trying to eliminate him?” Gervasio asked quizzically while using his geteilt to block Ferdinand’s attacks. Erwaermen must have said something to him—that was the only explanation I could think of.

I thought I made it clear to Erwaermen that I wasn’t going to play

along. Maybe he ignored me. Or maybe he just wasn't able to hear me.

In my desperation to avoid the fact that Gervasio knew my real name, I allowed my mind to wander. I didn't know how long Erwaermen had been in the Garden of Beginnings, but if he had been there since the country was established, it seemed reasonable to assume that he had grown hard of hearing. Former god or not, no one was immune to the march of time. There was also a chance that Yurgenschmidt's current mana shortage was to blame.

"Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm."

Schutzaria's shield appeared with a loud *shing*. Ferdinand immediately stopped providing covering fire with his gun and switched to a sword, which he began charging with mana. We were fighting as one like it was the most natural thing in the world, which instilled in me a profound sense of security.

"Quinta is not someone you should protect," Gervasio continued. "In fact, as I understand it, you are duty bound to kill him and complete your Book. Was that not the order you received, Myne?"

"Cease your useless prattle and die," Ferdinand said calmly and swung his sword. A ball of rainbow mana shot out and slammed into Gervasio's shield, blowing him and the statue behind him off the altar.

"Eep?!"

The airborne statue started to shine—or, to be more precise, its divine instrument did. Pillars of light formed and crossed together. It was so dazzling that I squeezed my eyes shut on instinct.

In the Garden of Beginnings

As soon as I closed my eyes, my sense of balance went haywire. It felt like I was tipping forward, and a floating sensation soon overtook me. I thought I was going to collapse, but someone pulled me close and said, “Stay focused, fool...” in a quiet, hasty voice. It was Ferdinand. His arm was right there, so I clung to it without a second thought.

For a moment, I was convinced that everything was okay—and then we hit the ground. The impact was only as jarring as if we’d tumbled out of bed, so we couldn’t have dropped very far, but I was still too disoriented to break my fall. I slammed straight into something hard.

“Guh!”

I opened my eyes and saw nothing but armor. I must have fallen on top of Ferdinand.

“Ouuuch...”

“Quit your whining and get off me!” Ferdinand barked.

Before I could even try to move, he pushed me aside and onto my back. Then he stood, already holding his schtappe at the ready.

Listen, buddy. Don’t get mad at me! You pulled me to you in the first place!

My head was spinning from being wrenched to one side, dropped, and then rolled over. I stumbled to my feet as well and suddenly realized we were in the Garden of Beginnings. Erwaermen was standing in place of the massive white tree that normally sat in the center of the circular room. Judging by the furrow in his brow and the mana radiating from him, he wasn’t in the best mood.

Well, Erwaermen looks ticked. I wonder what happened.

As I cocked my head in confusion, Gervasio let out a murmur of surprise. He was here with us, apparently. I turned to see him get to his feet, having fallen as we had, and then promptly kneel before Erwaermen, who continued to look thoroughly displeased with us all. Ferdinand was still gripping his schtappe, ready for combat, whereas I was doing my best to stop the world around me from

spinning.

“What in the world are you three candidates doing?” Erwaermen demanded. “Yurgenschmidt must be replenished with mana posthaste.”

The pieces were falling into place. He must have summoned us here so that he could complain. That also explained why he had taken his humanlike form; he wouldn’t have been able to converse with us as a tree.

“You in particular, Quinta,” he continued. “I gave you Mestionora’s wisdom in spite of the bizarre, disrespectful entrance you made. Yet you never came back to finish the transfer, nor did you even attempt to dye the country’s foundation. Then, when I thought you had returned at last, my visitor informed me they were someone else entirely. I instructed said person to kill you and complete the Book of Mestionora, but they flatly refused. My next visitor actually did intend to dye the foundation, but my relief was short-lived, as both the light of wisdom and their way to the foundation were blocked. Why do you interfere, Quinta? Do you not see that Yurgenschmidt is on the verge of collapse?!”

In short, Erwaermen was mostly frustrated with Ferdinand. He was actually directing his anger at us both, but I suspected that was because he still couldn’t tell us apart due to our nearly identical mana.

Ferdinand was unfazed; he casually made his Grutrissheit and started to look through it. “Erwaermen—though you claim that Yurgenschmidt is on the verge of collapse, Rozemyne extended its lifespan by roughly two decades when she filled the country gates with mana. That may seem like nothing to someone who has watched over the country since its inception, but from our perspectives, that is long enough for a child to be born and come of age.”

“Really?” I asked. “We have plenty of time, then. I wish my Book contained information like that.” I wandered over and asked to see his, but he slammed it shut as soon as I got close. “Oh, come on! Let me read it for a little while! Don’t be selfish!”

“Rozemyne, do you understand where you are and what is happening around you?”

I took a second to inspect Erwaermen, who wasn’t any less outraged, and then Gervasio, who was still on his knees. Even I could tell this wasn’t the best time to nag him, but...

"I do, but I don't want to miss one of my few chances to read your Book!"

"Then I understand completely. You are in the way. Step back." Ferdinand gave me a flick on the forehead and jutted out his chin as if ordering me to move aside. "We have already lost dozens of mana-producing citizens as a result of Gervasio's actions. An invader from Lanzenave is not fit to become the Zent when he will destroy the country from the inside."

"The rules of your human society mean nothing to me," Erwaermen replied. "Yurgenschmidt is the place of my atonement and a shelter for those in Ewigeliebe's sights. Its collapse must be avoided at all costs. I have waited long enough; I will not allow the birth of a new Zent to be obstructed. You who refuses to dye the foundation—disappear."

Erwaermen leisurely raised a hand and pointed in our direction. Ferdinand took in a sharp breath, then stepped in front of me and shouted, "*Geteilt!*" An orb of mana as strong as anything he could produce slammed into him without a shred of mercy.

"Eep!"

There was a loud screech as Ferdinand's shield exploded and one of the three charms on his arm burst. The blood drained from my face; this was unlike anything we had ever faced before.

"Go forth, Terza," Erwaermen instructed. "Replenish this country's foundation."

Gervasio stood up in silence. "Terza" must have been his name as a child if all those mentions of "Quinta" were anything to go by.

"*Rucken. Water gun,*" Ferdinand said. Then he shot Gervasio as soon as the man's back was turned.

The Lanzenavian king had run out of charms during his battle atop the altar, so the bullet went straight through his leg. He dropped to the ground with a subdued grunt.

"I told you not to interfere, Quinta."

"If you claim not to care for the world of men, then I do not care about your orders. I shall crown a new Zent, revive prayers, abolish the royal family, and ensure that future kings and queens are chosen from among those who can obtain the bible on their own merits. I must ask *you* not to interfere."

Erwaermen had been looking in Gervasio's direction, but he once again pointed at Ferdinand. I rushed to intercept the attack, poured all of my mana into forming the God of Darkness's cape, and

then spread it in front of us. It absorbed Erwaermen's strike, replenishing my mana. The entire amount I'd spent on that massive waschen was restored in the blink of an eye.

This is bad. There's way too much!

I scrambled to compress my mana, but there was too much for me to keep up with. My body started to feel warmer and warmer until, at last, I yelped in pain, feeling like someone had just dumped me in a pot of boiling water. Nostalgic though the feeling was, it wasn't something I'd ever wanted to experience again.

So hot... It hurts... Someone, help...

"Don't absorb it all, Rozemyne! Release it!"

Help me, gods!

I raised my arms high and shot out mana, which caused a bright pillar to appear in the Garden of Beginnings. I didn't know if my desperate plea counted as a prayer, but light began shining down from the open ceiling as if responding to my mana.

The light dominated my vision like it was the only thing in the world, and a new woman stepped out who looked just like me. She had hair the color of the night sky, eyes like golden moons, and a neatly symmetrical face. It was like when I first caught sight of my reflection after my sudden growth spurt. We weren't completely the same, though: the woman's hairstyle and clothes didn't match my own.

"Anwachs seemed pleased with his work, but I must admit, we look very much alike," the woman said. "As one with the Devouring, your mana should be pliable; do allow me to borrow your body for a moment."



Her voice was clear but gentle. I couldn't make out what she was actually saying to me, since she seemed to be speaking in another language, but the meaning automatically appeared in my head. Her words were being translated in real time.

"Come again...? You want to borrow my body?"

"You requested assistance, did you not? I shall stop Erwaermen for you." She rested a hand on her cheek and appeared contemplative. "He is putting even his own life in danger. How troubling..."

I didn't know who this woman was or where she had come from, but someone who could stop Erwaermen was exactly what I wanted. His mana capacity was as obscenely enormous as one would expect of a former god. It seemed impossible for any human to beat him.

"But what would borrowing my body entail...?" I asked. Would she give it back? And what would I be doing in the meantime? There were too many uncertainties for me to agree right away.

"I would not be able to stay down here forever. In the meantime, I would grant you a stay in quite a comfortable location."

The woman moved an arm, and our surroundings changed. We had moved to a library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on every wall, all stocked with such a wide variety of books. There were even more than in the Royal Academy—or in any library I'd ever seen on Earth, for that matter. I was so overwhelmed that I could only stare around in shock. There were comfy-looking chairs, and writing desks perfect for reading at. I could spend an eternity here without any problems at all.

"Perfection..." I muttered.

It was just like the library where I'd met that golden shumil on my way to the Book of Mestionora. But as I thought back to that wondrous occasion, I remembered the library had actually been an illusion to check the intentions of anyone who entered it.

"The shelves here aren't just painted on, are they...?" I asked.

"No, they are not," the woman replied. "Choose whichever book you please; they are replete with my wisdom. Spend your time here at your leisure while I utilize your body."

The woman motioned with a hand, prompting a golden shumil

to approach us with a book. It stood next to a nearby chair as if advising me to read there—and at that moment, I deduced whom I was speaking to. She was the goddess I'd prayed to more than any other.

“Woo-hoo! Take my body! Or keep it, if you want! Aah, what bliss! A paradise on earth made by the gods! Praise be to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom!”

I struck a sharp prayer pose, then rushed over to the golden shumil. The chair beside it was like a one-person sofa, even softer and more comfortable than the mattress benches I'd designed. The upholstery was pleasant to the touch and actually seemed to be radiating warmth.

The golden shumil waited for me to sit down before handing me the book it had arrived with. Maybe it was a tradition here in Yurgenschmidt for libraries to have shumil attendants. I opened the book to find stories about the gods written in an exceptionally ancient language.

I remember seeing stories like these in the bible and the book we borrowed from Dunkelfelger...

My eyes raced across the page as I eagerly absorbed the first story. It was about Verfuheremeer the Goddess of Oceans, who had received marriage proposals from two male gods. She had rejected them both, but the two men were subordinates to the God of Fire; the flames of their passion refused to die.

The incident had escalated to the point that several other gods needed to intervene. Verfuheremeer ultimately decided that if she failed to find a partner on her own, she would marry whichever of the two men won in combat. They had elected to decide the victor at once, and their massive battle had again drawn other gods into the mix.

Verfuheremeer had proposed the duel as a way of placating her two suitors until she found someone else to wed; she hadn't expected them to march straight into battle. Thus, when the other goddesses had informed her of the war that had suddenly broken out, she raced to the battleground and used her divine power to cool everyone down. Ever since then, a custom of summoning Verfuheremeer whenever the subordinates of Fire started warring among themselves had taken root.

Isn't this where Dunkelfelger's ritual comes from?

Verfuheremeer must have been painfully busy if she was being

summoned not only by Dunkelfelger but also by the other gods as well. I expressed my sympathy and moved on to the next story—a tragic tale of romance centered around Jugereise.

“Done,” I announced. “Next one, please.”

To my delight, I’d just finished my third book—an account of the goddess Liebeskhilfe. She had stolen threads of fate from Dregarnuhr and pulled countless pranks, spurring the Goddess of Time to finally retaliate by weaving threads into Liebeskhilfe’s hair. The Goddess of Binding had been none the wiser... until she suddenly discovered she was bound to a human man.

“I wonder what the next story will cover...” I mused aloud. “Tralala, lalala.”

“Rozemyne!”

As I eagerly awaited the return of my shumil attendant, an unexpected shout echoed through my mind. It was Ferdinand, sounding entirely like he’d crawled out of the depths of hell to smite me. My excitement vanished in an instant.

“Eep! Wh-What’s going on?!”

I covered my ears and looked around, but Ferdinand wasn’t there. I was still in the library of my dreams, with packed shelves all around me.

“So you finally heard me...” the furious voice continued. *“Get back here. Now. If you linger, all that you care about will disappear.”*

“Eep! O goddess, return my body to me! Ferdinand sounds angry!” I needed to leave now, else the Lord of Evil would crush me with his unjust wrath.

“I have been trying to speak with you for quite some time,” came the tired, exasperated voice of a goddess. “But you refused to answer me.”

I turned to look at her, but my vision wavered, and paradise started to disappear.

The Race to Become Zent

“Hm...?”

The library had vanished, and the Goddess of Wisdom was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I was now face-to-face with Ferdinand, who appeared to be at his wit's end. He was close enough that I could feel his breath, and there was nothing but worry in his eyes—the last thing I'd expected when he'd sounded so outraged.

I stared at Ferdinand in surprise, and my mouth flapped. Only then did his anger start to show. Something in my hand vanished at the same time.

“You *are* Rozemyne, correct?”

“Yesh,” I replied.

“Give me a proper response.”

“I'm sho showwy that I sheemingly shaddened or shurprised you in shome way.”

“What are you even saying?” Ferdinand snapped. But the slurring wasn't my fault; he was pinching my cheek so hard that it was tough to speak.

He's being so unreasonable today!

“Rozemyne—there is a limit to how long one can go without learning one's lesson.”

“Bwuh?”

I swatted at the hand on my cheek; the least Ferdinand could do was release me before starting his rant. He gave me one last squeeze, then let go... but he didn't move his face away. So much for my desire to get as far away from my lecturer as I could.

“Your feud with Bezewanst began after you charged into the temple's book room,” Ferdinand snapped. “Then you caught the royal family's attention by barging into the Royal Academy's library with unstable mana. Has it ever occurred to you that your obsession with books always leads to trouble?”

In my defense, I'd caused plenty of problems *without* the allure of a nice library. Protesting would only make things worse for me, though, so I simply nodded and allowed the lecture to wash over

me.

"It has?" Ferdinand replied. "Yet you *still* gave Mestionora your body in exchange for a chance to use her library. How could you be so foolish?"

"Let me tell you, it was *some* library. A paradise, even. The books there were seriously to die for, and they covered every wall. I'm sure there were plenty about research. You should come with me next time; then you'll understand just how amazing it was."

My attempt to calm Ferdinand instead made his cheek twitch. "Oh, how thrilling. An invitation to the distant heights. Was flirting with death once not enough for you?"

"The distant heights"?! So that wasn't a paradise on earth?!

Ferdinand clicked his tongue. "Have you not fully returned yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"Rozemyne, list the names of those important to you. Who came to mind when I threatened you? Can you remember what the goddess did when she obtained your body? What were you doing before you made the exchange? And what must we do now?"

"Huh? Umm..."

I was too overwhelmed to even ask why he was interrogating me all of a sudden. I tried to answer his questions but immediately drew a blank; there was a thin fog of sorts clouding my memories. What *had* I been doing?

"I don't know," I eventually replied. "But I remember the book I was just reading. It was about the gods, and—"

"Enough," Ferdinand interrupted with a grimace. "Do what you can to forget about it."

"Now you're just being cruel. I could never forget something I went out of my way to read."

"The goddess must have meddled with your mind to make it easier for her to inhabit your body. And to no small degree—the impact appears to have been quite profound."

I'd meant to lend the goddess my body only for a moment; I certainly hadn't consented to her messing with my mind. It was kind of scary to wonder what was happening to me. I drank a potion Ferdinand gave me and then asked what he'd meant.

"She did not answer my questions, so I do not know. Even if she left your mind untouched, I suspect you showed all the restraint of a pet being handed its dinner. Take care not to comply with the

requests of a god again—your mana is far too easily influenced.”

Though he didn’t actually say it, Ferdinand mouthed the words “Because of your Devouring.” There was pain in his eyes. I reached out and stroked the furrow in his brow, hoping to comfort him, but it only made his expression more stern.

“You seem to recognize me, but do you remember Ehrenfest’s archducal family?” he asked. “Do you remember the faces of your retainers? Try to name them.”

I did as instructed, listing off the names of everyone in the archducal family and each of my retainers. Ferdinand sighed in relief when I was done.

“Much better.”

“Sorry that I worried you. Fear not, though—I am so determined to recreate Mestionora’s library that I will not embrace the distant heights so easily.”

“You have only intensified my fears...” Ferdinand replied at length. Though his mouth was still twisted in displeasure, the anger was fading from his eyes. His emotions were always so hard to read, but at least he seemed to be feeling better.

“Are you two done yet?” came another, equally exasperated voice.

“Wait, what?” I muttered, my head cocked to one side. “There’s someone else here?” Ferdinand was still right in front of me, so my view was severely limited.

Ferdinand pulled away and stood up. “This is the Garden of Beginnings. Erwaermen and Gervasio are here with us.”

“Ah... Aaah! It’s all coming back to me! We were in the heat of battle! Ferdinand, how can you be so calm?!” I shot to my feet and moved to protect him. But as I took up arms against Erwaermen, a finger jabbed me in the back.

“Relax,” Ferdinand said. “The battle is over. Mestionora forbade the taking of any more lives.”

“Come again?” On closer examination, though both Erwaermen and Gervasio were looking at us, neither one of them seemed ready for combat. “To think she would settle the fight so easily... Goddesses sure are something. Praise be to—”

“Cease your prayer, fool!” Ferdinand yelled as I went to raise my hands. “Do you want the same thing to happen again?!”

Erwaermen gave a slight smile. “Myne—as one with the Devouring, you are more receptive to the power of others. If you

were to pray here, in a place meant for communing with the gods, they would most likely descend upon the earth for their amusement. I would welcome such a thing—they are dear friends of mine, after all—but it would place a tremendous burden on you. I would advise you to be careful.”

In stark contrast to before, Erwaermen’s tone was exceptionally calm. I could probably thank Mestionora for that; she not only had such a massive and wondrous library but also possessed the power to soothe a former god and end the fighting in the blink of an eye.

Wow, what a powerhouse. I wouldn’t expect anything less. Praise be to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom!

“So what did you all discuss with Mestionora?” I asked.

“We shared our desires and understandings of the current situation,” Ferdinand explained. “Then we agreed to continue our battle for the throne through more peaceful means.”

Gervasio grimaced. “Even in these circumstances, that was a gross abbreviation.” He was right; I was still none the wiser about what I’d missed.

“I strongly disagree. Given what is happening in the auditorium, we do not have time for a lengthy discussion.”

I understood that time was of the essence and that prioritizing efficiency was a staple for Ferdinand, but I still wanted a bit more detail. “At the very least, explain what everyone wanted and what information was shared,” I said. “I am still on edge and ready to fight.”

“You say that, but did you not forget we were fighting in the first place?”

Ferdinand could make as many observations as he pleased; it didn’t change the fact that I was deeply unnerved. He and Gervasio had been at each other’s throats, telling one another to die or turn into a feystone, but now they were conversing as normal—well, with the exception of the awkward atmosphere between them. Then there was Erwaermen. Just moments ago, he had been all “dispatch Quinta” this and “don’t obstruct Terza” that, but now he was quietly listening to reason.

“It’s not my fault so much changed while I was reading. Everyone’s so relaxed now that I can’t help being uncomfortable.”

“We were told exactly how the gods view this matter. Yurgenschmidt was made to welcome those facing Ewigeliebe’s persecution. Thus, the gods consider it only natural to welcome the

Lanzenavians seeking asylum.”

According to Ferdinand, Yurgenschmidt existed specifically to shelter the mana-wielders of the various outside worlds. If there were Lanzenavians with mana who wished to live here, the gods would accept them without a second thought.

“Did the gods think nothing of the Lanzenavians slaughtering dozens of Ahrensbach nobles?” I asked with a glare.

Erwaermen nodded, wearing a completely blank expression. “My words mean nothing to your human society. I have said not to kill, but men have killed each other by the thousands since time immemorial. Hundreds of nobles died recently—a few dozen more is a drop in the pond. And what does it matter when those from the outside will replace them?” From his perspective, the civil war had just taken place, and the deaths of a few more from Ahrensbach were barely even a blip on his radar.

“But it’s not a problem of numbers for us...” I said.

“Humans grow old and cut each other down. That is their nature. It is pointless to dwell on societal matters when circumstances change so drastically.”

Even just in Ehrenfest, there were vast gaps between us in the form of status and perspectives. Of course humans and gods wouldn’t see eye to eye.

“In any case,” Erwaermen continued, “so long has passed since anyone came to speak with me about human society.”

In the distant past, Zent candidates had regularly visited the Garden of Beginnings to obtain their Books of Mestionora. The abundance of mana had meant Erwaermen could take human form and interact with his guests whenever he pleased—but then the shortage had struck. Erwaermen had no longer been able to transform, and people had stopped obtaining the Book of Mestionora, likely because religious ceremonies had started dying out and the Sovereign temple had moved out of the holy land. To make matters even worse, the decision to pass a magic tool Grutrissheit from generation to generation had made praying largely redundant, so fewer people had visited the Garden of Beginnings at all. The history I’d absorbed made that clear to me.

“Conversation partners are irrelevant,” Erwaermen said. “In the absence of a Zent who can supply the foundation, the country gates have dried out, and Yurgenschmidt is on the verge of collapse. If nothing happens to remedy this, we can expect death on a scale

that would make your mere dozens seem laughable. My wish is for a new Zent to be born posthaste. I desire nothing else in particular.”

Erwaermen wanted someone—anyone—to hurry up and dye Yurgenschmidt’s foundation. He didn’t consider King Trauerqual a Zent in the slightest because of the man’s inability to carry out that most important duty.

“Thus,” he continued, “to forestall the looming devastation, we decided you Zent candidates should compete to see who should receive permission to dye the foundation.”

“Wait, what?” I asked. “Zent candidates”? To whom are you referring?”

“Are there Zent candidates beyond the three of you? If so, bring them here at once.” The anticipation in his voice made one thing clear: we were all such great troublemakers that he was ready to welcome just about anyone who could take our place.

“Well, Lady Detlinde is a self-proclaimed candidate, and some of the royals were able to make it here.”

Ferdinand shook his head. “As far as Erwaermen is concerned, one must have the Book of Mestionora to be a Zent candidate. The magic tool Grutrissheit holds no meaning.”

Ouch. So his standards are the same as they were in the ancient past. Not a single member of the current royal family counts as a candidate, then.

“Erwaermen wants Yurgenschmidt to be fully supplied with mana,” Ferdinand continued. “To that end, we three candidates will engage in a competition of speed. We shall race to fill the three drained country gates before returning here, to the Garden of Beginnings.”

“Whoever wins gets taken to the foundation,” Gervasio added.

The two men both wore confident smiles. It didn’t make sense. As I understood it, Ferdinand didn’t even want to become the Zent.

“Ferdinand... are you truly resolved to take the throne?” I asked.

“As long as I dye the foundation, Erwaermen will not question my decisions. I could punish the Lanzenavians or abolish the current royal family without opposition.”

Erwaermen had even praised the idea that, by the next generation, Zent candidates would need to earn their own Books of Mestionora again. It was an extremely long-term solution—and there was no guarantee it would work—but Ferdinand only needed

to dye the foundation. Then he could freely use the magic tool Grutrissheit to decree a new Zent and start trying to revive prayer.

“Quinta—I see you have once again omitted precious details,” Erwaermen said dryly. “Mestionora decreed that all life is valuable and not to be wasted. Keep that in mind.”

In other words, he would permit punishments but not lethal action. I’d never thought I would hear the phrase “all life is valuable” here in Yurgenschmidt, where mass executions of the innocent seemed so commonplace.

“You really should have recorded it...” I said.

“How would that have proved anything? Those who did not see Mestionora’s descent would only hear your voice.”

“True...”

I’d already earned a bit of a reputation for my compassion, so anyone who heard a recording of that nature would assume I was singing the same old song. Erwaermen was right—it wouldn’t have accomplished anything.

How unfortunate...

“And why do you want to be the Zent?” I asked, turning to Gervasio.

“It will grant me the power to destroy that villa. Girls will no longer be sent here to birth children doomed to live as I did, and those with mana will receive respect, not live in scorn.” He mentioned that he would also be able to rescue the Sovereign Order from Dunkelfelger’s reinforcements and assign new aubs to the presently empty duchies so that Lanzenavians could move to them.

“But why do you want to live here in Yurgenschmidt? The people of Lanzenave need your feystones and schtappes, don’t they?”

“That is not accurate.”

As it turned out, Lanzenave was making such great technological advancements in so many fields that mana-wielders were gradually being driven into a corner. The royals there were quickly losing their power and were being treated as no more than sources of mana.

“Lanzenave’s royal family is divided into two factions: one that wants us to return with a mass of schtappes and exercise our power over the populace once again, and another that wants to escape Lanzenave and stay here as Yurgenschmidt nobles.”

Leonzio was leading those who wished to return to Lanzenave

with schtappes, whereas Gervasio had come here in search of somewhere peaceful they could spend the rest of their lives. They had separate aims, but they both agreed that Yurgenschmidt was ripe for the picking while it lacked a proper Zent.

“Leonzio’s faction was behind the deaths of those Ahrensbach nobles,” Gervasio explained. “That said, as I understand it, Lady Detlinde gave him permission to do as he pleased with anyone in the duchy who would oppose her. It came as startling news to me; I did not think Yurgenschmidt gave power to those so willing to commit atrocities. But then I met her, and it occurred to me just how foolish and self-centered she really was.”

There was a short pause before Gervasio continued, “I need a position of power to ensure that Yurgenschmidt remains safe, to ensure we Lanzenavians are not punished, and to reward those of the Sovereign Knight’s Order who supported me. I *must* become the Zent.”

“Well, now I understand everyone’s motivations... but why am I getting drawn into this?” I asked. “I’m an aub, right? Doesn’t that prevent me from dyeing the country’s foundation?”

“If you are an aub, then you need only take part as one,” Erwaermen replied. “Aubs are meant to replenish the country gates in the first place.”

“My apologies, but that was only the case when the country was first founded and the aubs of each duchy had their own Books of Mestionora. Though, well... I don’t mind participating if replenishing the gates is that important...”

Erwaermen was basing his perspective on the days of old, so I was obligated to participate as well. “It would not be impossible for you to become the Zent,” he noted, now looking straight at me. “Someone else could dye your foundation. They would not even find it challenging—as you have the Devouring, your mana can easily be overwritten.”

“Erwaermen, how are you suddenly able to tell me apart from Ferdinand...?” I asked. “I thought our mana looked the same to you.”

“Yes, but you are currently filled with Mestionora’s power.”
So the goddess dyed me...

I gazed down at my arm and saw... absolutely nothing of note. I couldn’t see mana, so it looked the same as usual.

“I sense the divinity of the goddess within you, but your words

and actions detract from it,” Gervasio said. “I would rather you remain silent.” Though he looked at me with respect, I sensed that he was seeing someone else entirely.

“We have no more time to waste,” Erwaermen interjected. “The race will now begin. The gods shall decide your destinations for you.” He raised a finger and out shot three thin bands of mana—one red, one green, and one gold. We three Zent candidates received one each, at which point the former god said, “Dye the gate of your divine color.”

I’d received red, Ferdinand green, and Gervasio gold. That meant I would need to head to Klassenberg’s gate with the Goddess of Earth’s sigil, Ferdinand to Hauchletzte’s with the Goddess of Water’s, and Gervasio to Gilessenmeyer’s with the Goddess of Light’s.

“Now go,” Erwaermen said. “Forge your own teleportation circles and replenish the country gates.”

“Grutrissheit!”

At once, we three Zent candidates formed our Books of Mestionora. Ferdinand and Gervasio immediately began drawing in the air, but I still needed to search for what I wanted. I put “Klassenberg country gate teleportation circle” into my tablet while silently bemoaning its design.

Though I appeared to have fallen behind, that couldn’t have been further from the truth. I took out a sheet of fey paper, smirked, and then activated my spell.

“Copy and place!”

I finished my teleportation circle in the blink of an eye. Ferdinand noted that I was wasting my fey paper, not even pausing his work, while Erwaermen and Gervasio voiced their surprise.

Inspecting the room with a triumphant smile, I raised my Book of Mestionora and said, “*Kehrschluessel*. Klassenberg.” I was comfortably in first place.

The Lord of Evil's Machinations

Thanks to my copied teleportation circle, I'd arrived at my destination. Each country gate was basically the same on the inside, so I could tell them apart only by the sigils of the primary gods drawn on their circles. A quick glance was all it took for me to spot Geduldh's. I must have been in Klassenberg.

"I just need to fill the gate with mana, right?"

I approached the wall and pressed my Book of Mestionora against it. Because I'd already supplied the country gates in Ehrenfest, Dunkelfelger, and Ahrensbach, I was well accustomed to the process.

An easy win. Like taking candy from a baby. Heheheh.

As my mana streamed into the country gate through my Book of Mestionora, I suddenly noticed the magic circle behind me shine. I turned around while taking care not to disrupt the flow.

Huh? What...?

Only those with a Book of Mestionora or the Grutrissheit kept in the underground archive could use these teleportation circles. And as only members of royalty could access the latter, Ferdinand or Gervasio had to be behind this surprise appearance.

Don't tell me someone's coming here to sabotage me. There's only one person who would even consider such a thing...

"Is that you, Ferdinand?!"

"Well deduced," he replied as he appeared atop the teleportation circle.

"I *would* ask if you came here by mistake, but let's be honest, that would never happen. Based on prior experience, I suspect you're here to sabotage the race that Mestionora and Erwaermen set up." I pointed straight at him and declared, "You can't hide anything from me!"

"Well, that saves me having to explain the obvious," Ferdinand replied, not even attempting to disguise his intentions. I wouldn't have believed whatever excuses he might have thrown at me, but still—would it really have hurt him to try?

“Go on, then—what are you plotting? How are you going to sabotage me?”

“I take it back; I *do* need to explain the obvious. Pray tell, how would trying to sabotage *you* benefit me? I am here to sabotage Gervasio.”

Our race was, in short, a simple, easy-to-understand test to see which of us Zent candidates had the most mana. It would also measure our ability to draw teleportation circles, the completeness of our Books of Mestionora, and our experience in magecraft.

“I was first because of my secret technique, but you drew your teleportation circle much faster than Gervasio,” I said. “I don’t know how much of the mana you expended during battle you’ve managed to recover, but with your vastly more potent rejuvenation potions, you are at a considerable advantage. Why not play fair this time, hm?”

Ferdinand gave a sardonic smile. “Hmph. Fair, you say? Even though you contributed most to sabotaging Gervasio?”

“Um, I did...? That doesn’t ring a bell, I’m afraid.”

“Has your memory not returned, or are you still completely lacking in self-awareness?”

“Probably the latter. I remember what we were doing before Mestionora descended.”

Ferdinand gave his temple a few irritated taps. “I expected you to have learned *something* by now... It was your idea that we interrupt Gervasio while he was in the Garden of Beginnings. Because of our actions, his Book of Mestionora is severely damaged and mostly incomplete. The Goddess of Wisdom said that even if he returns to the Garden of Beginnings, she will not be able to give him the knowledge he lacks.”

I clapped my hands together, recalling how I’d spread out the God of Darkness’s cape to recover my mana. “Oh, right. That’s one point for lacking self-awareness.”

“As expected. Gervasio’s bible contains only fragments of the route to the foundation. As far as Erwaermen is concerned, all three of us are deeply unappealing Zent candidates with incomplete Books of Mestionora.”

Gervasio’s Book was doomed to forever remain incomplete. And while Ferdinand or I *could* obtain a complete one, neither one of us wanted to.

If we’re Yurgenschmidt’s last hope, then the future really does seem

bleak. No wonder Erwaermen was so eager for me to bring more Zent candidates.

“Just a moment,” I said. “I gave you all the information necessary to complete that magic tool Grutrissheit, remember? Did you not mention that fact to Erwaermen?” Had the former god known that Ferdinand was carrying a largely complete Book of Mestionora, this contest wouldn’t even have been necessary.

“I did not. He thinks my Book is still incomplete—which is not untrue, as there are still gaps in the more irrelevant sections.”

“Oh, fantastic. You’re a great schemer who lies by omission. So impressive. I want to know *why* you chose to deceive him.”

“I considered it my best move. You need not know any more than that.”

His reasoning aside, it was his shameless declaration that had made Erwaermen announce his intention to take the winner of our race to the foundation.

“And you didn’t think to warn me?” I asked.

“You have a tendency to disclose sensitive information. Thus, I tell you only what is necessary.”

“That’s so mean!” I shouted, fixing him with a sharp glare. Sure, I was used to Ferdinand not telling me things and acting alone, but that didn’t make it any more acceptable. “Can you at least say what you expect me to do? Though I’ll warn you now, I refuse to attack Gervasio or anything of the sort.”

“I would never ask that of you,” he replied, exasperated. “You would never succeed in such a task.”

He had me there. It was actually a little upsetting.

Ferdinand continued, “Once you have finished supplying mana, return to the central building. Contact your guards before you leave the teleportation hall. I shall ask Ehrenfest to prepare somewhere you can rest.”

“Somewhere I can... rest?”

“You will need some time to recover, will you not? You might not be able to use Ahrensbach’s dormitory, but Ehrenfest’s should still be available to you.”

My eyes dropped to the brooch attached to my cape. I’d tried to return it to Sylvester before teleporting to Ahrensbach, but he had told me to keep it until I was officially recognized as an aub. As long as I had it, I could continue to call myself an Ehrenfest noble.

“Um, Ferdinand... I took my attendants to Ahrensbach,

remember?” Lieseleta, Gretia, and the others weren’t in Ehrenfest anymore, so we were going to be shorthanded.

“Are you forgetting about Rihyarda, Brunhilde, and Ottilie?”

“Rihyarda has gone back to serving Sylvester, and is Brunhilde not busy preparing for her wedding? I can’t treat them like they’re still my attendants; it would only trouble them.”

“Trouble them? We are doing Ehrenfest a favor.”

“How is putting me up in the Ehrenfest Dormitory anything but an inconvenience?”

“It will prove Ehrenfest’s involvement in this battle for the Sovereignty. As we know, channeling mana into the country gates causes them to shine brilliantly. This will not be quite as obvious now that the sun has risen, but it will not go unnoticed—not unless the duchies overseeing them were as foolish as Ahrensbach and elected not to station knights at their border gates. They will alert their aubs, who will contact the royal family or other Sovereign nobles before rushing to the Sovereignty. In the long term, it will prove fatal for Ehrenfest if Sylvester is not at the Royal Academy.”

In the aftermath of the civil war, there had been a clear distinction between how the winners and losers were treated. Our decision to participate would greatly impact our influence and authority in Yurgenschmidt going forward.

“Ehrenfest must provide support in a way that other duchies can see,” Ferdinand explained. “The intelligence we shared prior to the invasion will mean nothing to anyone but Dunkelfelger, so if we attempt to rely on it, we will struggle to protect Ehrenfest moving forward. The battle against Georgine means that sending reinforcements is out of the question, but they should still have the capacity for rear support.”

Indeed, dawn had already broken; Ehrenfest would surely have people who were awake and ready to help.

“Ehrenfest must make its contribution to the battle painfully clear,” Ferdinand concluded. “There is no shame in taking this opportunity to relax. You will need as much rest as you can get for the tribulations to come.”

Wait. “The tribulations to come”?!

“Excuse me?!” I cried, my eyes wide open. “Just what do you intend to make me do?!”

He tapped a finger against his temple, then gave me the same suspicious smile he wore whenever he was hiding something. “Once

you have supplied this gate with mana, I would ask you to supply Hauchletzte's as well. Only if you feel able, mind you; this is by no means a requirement. Now, I must be going. Take care to seal the teleportation circle behind me. As you do not have your guard knights with you, we cannot be too cautious."

Ferdinand was on guard against Gervasio even now that the Zent race was underway. He warned me of the potential danger—a reminder that I wasn't being wary enough. I nodded as I did my best to absorb his every word.

"Remember," Ferdinand said, "once you have finished supplying mana, return to the Royal Academy and summon your retainers. Listen to them well, then ensure you rest in the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Is that understood?"

"Is there anything for me to do other than Mana Replenishment?" I asked, now feeling the danger as well.

Ferdinand placed a contemplative hand on his chin, then reached out his other arm and gave my shoulder a light shove. I stumbled back a little, but he caught me before I could topple over.

Eesh. That came out of nowhere.

"Were you checking something?" I asked.

"If even that was enough to disrupt your balance, then you will need more practice."

"Practice? For what, exactly?"

"I wonder if we have enough time..." Ferdinand mumbled instead of answering my question; then he started reactivating the teleportation circle.

"Ferdinand! Wait! You owe me an explanation!"

"Kehrschluessel. Ersterde."

Seemingly unable to hear me, Ferdinand warped not to his assigned gate in Hauchletzte but to the Royal Academy's central building.

Why was he so insistent about me resting in the Ehrenfest Dormitory? What is he trying to make me do?

He had something absurd in mind—my history with him told me that much. Anytime he wanted something done, he completely ignored my circumstances and refused to elaborate to ensure I would end up doing as he pleased.

I wish he'd just be frank with me. It's not like I'd refuse to help. Hmph.

Grumbling on the inside, I sealed the teleportation circle as

instructed and returned to supplying the country gate.

As soon as I was done, I teleported to Hauchletzte. Not for Ferdinand, mind you; Yurgenschmidt was in danger and desperately needed more mana. That was my excuse, anyway.

Ngh... I must have overdone it.

Using too much mana and drinking too many rejuvenation potions had given me a splitting headache. The pain went from my neck to my skull, like a sharp blade had suddenly impaled me.

“Guh... To think Ferdinand predicted when I’d need to rest... That’s annoying... And, wait... That means he *knew* I’d go to Hauchletzte as he asked. That’s even more frustrating.”

I continued to gripe under my breath, pausing only to reactivate the teleportation circle I’d sealed.

“Kehrschluessel. Ersterde.”

The magic circle shone with omni-elemental light, then rose into the air and started to spin. A second magic circle below me activated as well as if swept up in the excitement. Both circles sucked out my mana, and the world around me dissolved into a white haze. My vision swayed so violently that I soon had to squeeze my eyes shut and sit on the floor.

I waited a moment for the floating sensation to fade, then slowly opened my eyes. I’d arrived safe and sound in the Royal Academy’s teleportation hall, but my teleportation sickness combined with my complete lack of mana meant I was feeling rougher than ever.

“Guhhh... This sucks...”

Nonetheless, it wasn’t like I could go to sleep in the teleportation hall. I used what strength I could muster to send a letter to Cornelius announcing my return. He immediately replied that he was outside and that I should cover my mouth before leaving. They intended to take me back to the dormitory by highbeast.

Cover my mouth...?

I slowly rose to my feet, my head cocked, then pressed a hand over my mouth and opened the door. Angelica and Cornelius were waiting right outside, and there was a group wearing Ahrensbach capes farther down the hall.

I didn’t even have time to blink before Angelica threw a large sheet of cloth over me and swept me up.

What the heck?!

I didn't have a clue what was going on, but I made sure to keep my hand firmly over my mouth, even as what must have been Angelica's highbeast started to move. Right now, my main duty was to stay quiet.

"My apologies, Lady Rozemyne," Angelica whispered. "This was the only way to get you to the dormitory without those from other duchies sensing the goddess's power within you."

The cloth was removed only once I was inside the Ehrenfest Dormitory. I took a moment to inspect my surroundings, then looked at my knights in a daze; we had entered not through the usual door but through the door one used when returning from the gathering spot.

"Ferdinand instructed you to do this, didn't he?" I asked. "What is he doing now? Um... Cornelius? Leonore? Matthias? Laurenz?" I'd deliberately omitted Angelica's name, as I doubted Ferdinand had explained the situation to her.

"Well, er... How do I put this...?" Cornelius muttered. "Hartmut wept and prayed to the gods, but even then, I didn't think it would be this extreme."

"You didn't think *what* would be this extreme...?"

"The divine power. No wonder Lord Ferdinand gave us strict orders to cover you with silver cloth and move you into the dormitory in secret."

As it turned out, I was radiating such intense divine power that it was hard to look straight at me. I would never have guessed it from my conversation with Ferdinand; he had seemed as stoic as always.

"Lady Rozemyne," Leonore interjected, "Lord Ferdinand also ordered that you be put to bed." Her eyes wandered, and she apologetically continued, "Could you, um... go back under the cloth so that Angelica can take you to your room? We do not want to cause a stir."

My current predicament must have been even more unusual than I'd realized. I didn't want to trouble anyone—or wait a moment longer before crawling into bed—so I said, "Certainly" and allowed Angelica to carry me to my room.

The silver cloth was soon removed again, allowing me to see the female attendants busily moving around my room. The moment Clarissa met my eye, she crossed her arms over her chest and knelt.

“O Lady Rozemyne, what divinity!” she wept. “You truly are the avatar of a goddess. I was able to feel your mana being dyed, but I never thought you would return overflowing with divine power. Your Darkness-blessed tresses are glossier than ever before, your Lightness-blessed eyes exude such strength, and even your posture radiates—”

“Clarissa,” Rihyarda snapped, “save your pointless rambling for later and prepare some medicine so milady can rest. A good retainer would never neglect her duties.” She gestured at Bertilde and Ottilie, urging them to make my bed, then looked at me and sighed. “You are deathly pale, milady. If you are too weary for a hot bath, might I suggest you cleanse your body with a waschen once you’ve eaten?”

“Even eating sounds like too much for me...”

Clarissa had gotten straight to work preparing my medicine, and she looked at me with the expression of a honed scholar. “Lord Ferdinand said you must eat before you drink your medicine.”

The medicine in question was an especially intense rejuvenation potion meant to replenish mana in no time at all. I’d wormed my way out of taking a bath, but I was doomed to eat. I gave up and sat down as Brunhilde brought some food in for me.

“Lord Sylvester ordered us here as soon as the knights in the dormitory relayed Lord Ferdinand’s request for aid,” Rihyarda said while serving me. “Our priority is securing a place for you to rest, so we gathered some chefs and came at once. The others are on the way.” It had been such a long time since she’d waited on me like this.

I turned to Leonore, who was standing watch behind me. “From your perspective, what happened while I was up on the altar?”

“Seven radiant beams shot from the divine instruments of the auditorium’s statues, and the three of you disappeared at once. We stared in shocked silence, but not the Dunkelfelgerians; they continued their methodical capture of the Sovereign knights.”

Aub Dunkelfelger had instructed his knights to capture the traitors whether we were there or not, then worked with Magdalena to take down Raublut. The knight commander had fought tirelessly but ultimately lost.

“Together with Dunkelfelger, we restrained the last of the Sovereign knights,” Leonore continued. “It was then that Hartmut burst into tears and started declaring that a goddess had dyed your

mana.”

Seriously? There’s no way he came out of that not looking like a total weirdo.

“Your other name-sworn confirmed that your mana had changed, but they could not tell whether it belonged to a goddess. Hartmut was furious; he criticized their uncertainty before launching into a rant about how your power was throbbing with divinity. It was so repulsive and out of place for such a grave battle that we left him bound with the Sovereign knights.”

Wowee. Leonore sure is merciless.

“Lord Ferdinand was the only one to return,” Leonore continued. “We asked about your status, and that was when he told us Mestionora had manifested in you to crown a new Zent. Hartmut had actually been telling the truth, to all of our surprise. Lord Ferdinand is now laying the groundwork for the goddess’s will to be done.”

Hartmut and Ferdinand had made the same ridiculous claims, but only the latter had actually been believed. It was kind of sad, in a way.

“Leonore, can you tell me what *exactly* Ferdinand might be doing...?” I asked somewhat hesitantly. By not participating in the Zent race and dyeing the foundation, he had gone against the goddess’s will. I couldn’t think of anything else he would need to prepare for.

“Upon his return to the auditorium, he ordered that food and a place to rest be prepared in the Ehrenfest Dormitory. We were given instructions for when you returned. He also relayed the goddess’s wish that no more lives be taken and told the knights of Dunkelfelger to capture—not kill—Gervasio in the event that they found him.” In true Ferdinand fashion, he had peppered his commands with any number of threats.

We had apparently been told to eat and rest in shifts. Ahrensbach’s knights would manage with their provisions, but our allies from Dunkelfelger had to return to their dormitory in groups. Delivering food to the knights engaged in battle was an important duty for rear supporters.

“Ehrenfest is covering our and your provisions,” Leonore continued. “Food prepared in the villa at Lord Ferdinand’s order has been brought to the Ehrenfest Dormitory. After dinner, more will be prepared for Ahrensbach’s knights.”

Ferdinand had said that the food in the Adalgisa villa belonged to Ahrensbach, since it had all come through the Lanzenave Estate. That was fair enough, if you asked me. Ehrenfest had provided the chefs.

“Furthermore... Let’s see... According to Cornelius, Lord Ferdinand also instructed Prince Hildebrand to use his role as a member of the Library Committee to return the key Raublut took.”

The third prince’s mother, Magdalena, had been reluctant to agree; returning the key had seemed anything but urgent, especially when there might have been more traitors lurking around the Academy. There was also the fact that the order had come from Ferdinand, of all people. Any mother in her shoes would worry for her child.

Ferdinand had subsequently informed Magdalena that, through Raublut’s manipulation, her son had acquired a schtappe. He had also mentioned that the Lanzenavians had acquired *their* schtappes by following him. Magdalena had paled in response, at which point he had smiled and said, “As a new Zent is soon to take the throne, would you not like someone to put in a good word for him and reduce his punishment to some degree?”

Look, I get it—Prince Hildebrand was the only available member of the Library Committee. It wasn’t like we could summon Hannelore all the way from Dunkelfelger. Even so, I can’t believe he’d take advantage of a mother’s love! That really is devious!

I ate my food, less than enthused about what Leonore was telling me, then drank the potion that Clarissa had prepared. Brunhilde put away the plates while Bertilde undid my hair, Rihyarda cast waschen on me, and Ottilie changed my clothes and put me to bed.

“Leonore, is Ferdinand resting as well at the moment?” I asked.

“No, my lady. He went to the Sovereign temple with Prince Anastasius. Hartmut accompanied them to search for Immanuel, the Sovereign High Bishop.”

The Sovereign temple? Wait... Is he after the bible’s key?!

Just as the keys given to the duchies’ High Bishops granted access to those duchies’ foundations, the key to the Sovereign temple’s bible must have led to Yurgenschmidt’s. Ferdinand was systematically crushing every chance Gervasio might have of taking the throne.

But why are you doing all this instead of dyeing Hauchletzte’s

country gate?!

We were in the midst of a Zent race emulating speed ditler. But rather than competing, Ferdinand was off playing his own game of treasure-stealing ditler.

“Lord Ferdinand asked that you practice your dedication whirl upon waking. There will also be a meeting with the royal family. He wants you to rest now while you have the chance.”

My dedication whirl?! A meeting with the royal family?! I don't get it! Where the absolute heck is all this coming from?!

Any thoughts about the current battle were blown right out of my head; there was so much more I needed to ask about. But before I could even figure out where to begin, the medicine kicked in, sending me into a deep slumber.

Machinations Complete

“Are you feeling refreshed, milady?” Rihyarda asked. “It is almost fifth bell, but you can rest for a little while longer if you need to.”

I pondered the question. It didn’t feel like I’d slept at all, yet I was completely refreshed. I saw no reason to go back to sleep and risk waking up feeling worse.

“I shall rise,” I said. “Is Ferdinand back yet?”

“He took lunch here, met with the aub to discuss various matters, and then sent ordonnanzes all over the place. As we speak, he should be resting in the villa with the Ahrensbach knights. He said you need not worry about Ahrensbach at the moment and that you should contact him once you are awake.”

The Ahrensbach knights couldn’t return home without registration brooches. Resting in the villa was certainly better than camping outside on the Academy’s grounds, but was Ferdinand even able to relax? He had so much history there that I couldn’t help worrying.

“Let us prepare tea first, milady. We shall eat a light meal in place of lunch.”

“Certainly. Could we have our postmeal tea on the first floor? I wish to hear Ferdinand’s report.”

“I shall consult the aub and return with his permission.”

“Sylvester’s here too?” I asked, unable to mask my surprise. I’d assumed that Florencia would be in charge here, given her experience providing rear support.

“If we revealed you to the public as you are now, it would cause a tremendous stir. For that reason, the royal family has been invited to Ehrenfest’s tea party room for lunch the day after tomorrow. We received instructions from Ferdinand, and the archducal couple is hard at work preparing.”

Rihyarda then stepped outside my bed-curtain. “Ottilie, contact the male retainers. Brunhilde, Bertilde, have milady changed. Clarissa, inform Ferdinand’s retainers that she has awoken.”

Though I couldn't see them, the bustling that followed told me my retainers had sprung into action. Brunhilde and Bertilde helped me change. It was my first time seeing the outfit they'd brought me. As I gazed down at it, Brunhilde gave me a troubled smile.

"Back in Ehrenfest, the seamstresses are working with great haste to finish your fitted clothes. This particular outfit is from Lady Florencia's personnel. To accelerate its completion, it was designed so that any minor adjustments can be made with laces. They also used cloth that had already been completed at the time of your fitting. We expect another outfit from the Gilberta Company to arrive tomorrow."

I gazed at Brunhilde in the mirror; her hands were trembling as she did my hair. She must have sensed my eyes on her as she looked away and put a hand on her cheek, searching for the right words.

"Though I understand that this is the goddess's divine power, it requires an immensely strong will to face you directly..." she eventually said. "The closer I get, the more I am overcome with awe, which causes my hands to shake against my will. Standing as close to you as we are, I can even see the light radiating from you."

Bertilde nodded. "My sister is correct; at the moment, you are radiating divinity in the most literal sense. I am so glad to have had the chance to serve you today."

Umm, Bertilde looks giddy with excitement—like she might start worshipping me at any moment. Hearing all this about divine power and the awe they feel just from being near me... Am I even human anymore?

Had these remarks come from Hartmut, I wouldn't have thought twice about them, but my usually normal retainers were now gazing upon me in wonderment. It made me a little uncomfortable. Though I was filled with the mana of a goddess, I was still the same person on the inside.

"If everyone in the orphanage saw you as you are now, Lady Rozemyne, they would start praying as fervently as Hartmut," Philine noted, looking dazzled as she watched me from a distance. "Wilma would doubtless start trying to draw you. One can't normally sense the mana of another when it grows too distant, but all can feel the goddess's power. Everyone who came here from Ehrenfest was drawn to your bedroom, though this passed when we did as Lord Ferdinand instructed and covered you with silver cloth."

My mere presence was causing a stir. I sincerely hoped there

existed a way for me to be rid of this unwanted mana; at this rate, it would severely disrupt my daily life.

“Damuel and I guarded you while you slept,” Judithe informed me. “It sounds like your battle was absolutely crazy. Laurenz said he nearly drowned in the auditorium! I wish I’d been there; I can’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like.”

Judithe had arrived at the dormitory with Damuel while I was asleep. Few other people would hear about the washing machine carnage in the auditorium and wish to have experienced it themselves.

“I, too, wish you had been there,” I replied. “I consider it a great shame that you were too young to accompany us; there was a moment when your unique talents would have greatly aided us.”

I went on to tell Judithe how she could have sniped Raublut atop the stage. She gave a proud smile in response.

Once I was changed, I went back under the silver cloth to block the goddess’s troublesome mana and prepared to move to another room for tea. Angelica was tasked with carrying me, since she specialized in enhancement magic.

I wouldn’t have been able to walk there; the silver cloth blocks so much light that I can’t even see my feet!

I’d proposed traveling in my Pandabus instead, but Leonore had calmly refused. Even if the aub permitted it, I wouldn’t be able to see through the cloth.

Still, I can’t believe I’m getting carried everywhere! I’m not a little kid anymore!

I trembled with embarrassment under the cloth until we reached our destination. Our meeting over tea was about to begin.

“I was told you slept well,” Ferdinand said.

As soon as my silver cloth was removed, Eckhart and Justus widened their eyes, then exchanged a few quick nods. I saw Damuel among the retainers lined up against the wall.

“As much as I appreciated it, I must ask—did *you* get much rest?”

“I required the assistance of a potion, but yes.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Let me guess—the potion that wakes you up with a nightmare?”

“In a place as morbid as the villa, I was doomed to have nightmares anyway. Maximizing my rest was the best decision.”

So he didn’t get much rest at all!

As I was pursing my lips, the attendants prepared our tea and served us both food. Ferdinand must not have eaten much for lunch either.

“I was told the knights in the villa slept in shifts,” I said. “Do you have any updates on the prisoners?”

“They are still restrained in the villa. The Sovereign Order is entirely useless at the moment; we will decide the knights’ punishment during our meeting with the royal family. We must discuss how to follow the goddess’s decree that deaths be kept to a minimum.”

In other words, he wants to dump as much of the burden on the royals as he can.

“As the archducal couple is preparing to host our royal guests,” Ferdinand continued, “Charlotte has taken a position of authority in supporting the Ahrensbach knights. We will need to thank her later.”

During the Defense of Ehrenfest, Charlotte had done an excellent job of providing rear support in Florencia’s stead. She had picked up so many skills, and now she was putting them to use. It was very heartening.

“She excels at supporting others,” Ferdinand remarked. “I must admit, she is well suited to being a first wife.”

“Oh my. Do my ears deceive me, or were those words of praise? I shall convey them to her alongside a show of my appreciation.”

“Do as you please, but make it big. A greater gesture will aid Ehrenfest’s reputation.”

From there, we activated an area-affecting sound-blocker. I waited for our retainers to leave, then took a sip of Brunhilde’s tea and said, “Ferdinand, was it really okay for me to rest? I thought we had to return to the Garden of Beginnings after supplying the gates with mana.”

“I foresee no problems. Erwaermen perceives time in such a way that we could wait another ten years and it would not faze him. I assume he would prefer we return with a new Zent—or at the very least, with news that one has been selected.”

He had a point. Erwaermen barely distinguished the civil war of two decades ago from the present; it wouldn’t do him any harm to wait an extra day or two.

“Still, what happened with Gervasio?” I asked. “Was he captured upon his return?”

"No, but I intend to retrieve him eventually."

"Retrieve him?" That didn't sound good. "What have you done to him, Ferdinand?"

"First, to buy us some time, I shot him in the hand the moment he finished drawing his magic circle, distracting him long enough for me to destroy it."

"Right in front of Erwaermen?!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He'd attacked Gervasio right after being told that life needed to be treasured. And if what he was saying was true, then he'd already begun his sabotage by the time he'd rendezvoused with me in Klassenberg.

"My intention was to delay him, not take his life," Ferdinand said. "And in any case, I gave him a potion to heal the wound."

Is he proud of that fact?!

"Right... You said that was your *first* move, so what happened next? I was told you went to the Sovereign temple." My retainers had given me a decent summary of his antics, but what he'd done in the temple was still a mystery to us all.

"I retrieved the Sovereign High Bishop's bible, its key, and the medals of those who went to Lanzenave as kings. Immanuel was quite the bother while I was there. He lives, but I made sure to silence him."

Wait... That sounded extremely violent.

I reflexively touched one of my charms through my clothes; Ferdinand might have used one of the magic circles that allowed one to inflict damage on another person without killing them.

"The bible and key have been entrusted to Hartmut, for he is both name-sworn to you and a fellow High Priest. An ideal outcome, no?"

I glanced at Hartmut, who returned a nod of absolute assurance. He looked so mature and, well... *serious* that the tales of his rant in the auditorium seemed unreal.

"And as for the medals...?" I asked.

"They are the domain of archduke candidates. I saw to it that Gervasio's was destroyed, but the other one is now with me. We shall discuss it during our meeting with the royal family."

"Huh? Wait, hold on. You *destroyed it*? But you told me he was alive."

"You speak as though I deceived you. The medal was destroyed while he was at Gilessenmeyer's country gate, so he merely lost his

schtappe. That was why I went out of my way to stall him and kept such a close eye on his teleportation circle.”

“Ah...”

And of course, losing his schtappe meant Gervasio had also lost his Book of Mestionora. He wouldn't be able to supply his country gate or use its teleporter to leave, which explained why Ferdinand would need to “retrieve” him.

Yeah, I don't want Ferdinand as an enemy. That's terrifying.

Ferdinand sipped his tea and continued: “It would have been ideal to capture the man behind Lanzenave's invasion before our meeting with the royals—but for safety's sake, we should starve him first so that he cannot fight back.”

Terrifying.

“Was it really necessary to play such dirty tricks on Gervasio?” I asked. “He didn't seem like such a bad guy to me. It was another faction that attacked Ahrensbach's nobles, and they were acting with Lady Detlinde's permission. I seriously think we could have come to an understanding.” If we had met under better circumstances, we might not have needed to fight Gervasio at all.

Ferdinand gave me a look of grave concern. “Was your sense of self-preservation torn to ribbons with your memory? Think for a moment. He told us his goals were to save the Lanzenavians and reward those among the Sovereign knights who rebelled against Trauerqual, but he said nothing of the nobles currently living in Yurgenschmidt or those of us who got in his way. Though he strove to become the Zent, his mindset was that of a king of Lanzenave. It was impossible for us to know what he was truly thinking.”

Any noble would put up a front and play nice when a literal goddess descended upon the earth and demanded an end to the fighting. Ferdinand and Gervasio had seemed to be getting along when I'd returned from the goddess's library... but apparently not.

“Gervasio was chosen and educated to become the king of Lanzenave, but he loathed going there; his aim has always been to rule Yurgenschmidt. Even now, his determination and tenacity are greater than you could ever imagine. You need not understand what he has been through—he survived the villa and endured tremendous hardships—but do not entrust your life to him so easily. Fool.”

“Sorry.”

Speaking out of turn had put me on the receiving end of an

extra lecture. It probably wouldn't happen again.

"Gervasio aside," I said, "how will the other Lanzenavians be dealt with?"

"Our meeting with the royal family will decide."

"That's a long time from now. Are we not in more of a rush than that?" The day after tomorrow felt like an eternity away.

"Our most urgent aims were capturing the Lanzenavians and eliminating Gervasio before he could take the throne. Now that we have achieved them, the royals and the country at large can wait. Let them buzz about the activated gates and the announcement of a new Zent. Our recovery comes first."

As far as Ferdinand was concerned, we were under no obligation to work through our exhaustion—not to satisfy the same royals who had made us wait three days when we'd tried to warn them of the coming crisis. We had only agreed to meet them so soon as an act of kindness to Magdalena and Anastasius, who had ultimately helped us when we needed it most.

"Not to mention," he continued, "your outfit will not be ready any sooner than the date of our discussion. You will need the proper attire for a meeting with royalty."

"You're right about that. Though I think my appearance is absurd enough already—something I did not realize at first because of your unchanging stoicism."

Ferdinand gave me a serious glare. "Doubt me all you want, but I did change my attitude while you were possessed."

Oh, I see. I thought he'd continue down the lonely road of being a jerk, but even the Lord of Evil shapes up in the presence of a real goddess. Not that he'd ever do the same for me.

"How should I pass the time until our meeting with the royals?" I asked.

"Did I not tell you to practice dedication whirling?"

"To what end...? I might be used to moving in this body, but whirling is another story. I'd dance straight to an early grave."

"Hence the need for you to practice. Returning to the Garden of Beginnings with the new Zent by whirling is advisable over returning there through the divine protections ritual. Others will not be able to replicate it so easily. As you are now, anyone would consider you the avatar of a goddess; can you imagine the embarrassment if you fell over like a certain someone?"

"This is literally the first I'm hearing about using a dedication

whirl to return to the Garden of Beginnings!”

“Is that so?” Ferdinand asked, not moved in the slightest. “Nonetheless, I consider it the best way to transport the country’s new ruler to the Garden of Beginnings and to show our loudmouthed spectators what it looks like when a *true* Zent candidate whirls. It cannot be helped.”

“It can’t be helped?! You probably engineered it! Hmph!”

Ferdinand gave me the same sparkly smile he wore when he was thoroughly displeased. “Would there be a problem with that?”

“Fair enough. I shall practice my whirling.”

“Good.”

No, not “good”! You big dummy!

Not even my fiercest glare would sway Ferdinand, and there was zero chance of him taking back what he’d said. My fate was sealed.

“Do not wander about,” Ferdinand warned. “The influence of your divine power is so immense that you will trouble all those who cross your path. Practice in your chambers. As you had the skill to pass each of your Academy classes on the very first day, I suspect you will whirl satisfactorily once you learn to control your new body.”

My current objective was to whirl in a way that Ferdinand would deem “satisfactory”... but was there even time for that? My opportunity to rest was well and truly over.

“Perhaps I could use enhancement magic while whirling...”

“So your memory *was* devastated. Do you not remember how, during the temple’s Dedication Ritual, the mana you channeled into enhancements was sucked out alongside the rest of the mana flowing into the chalices? The magic circle will drain you entirely if you attempt to use enhancements atop it, and you will meet the same fate as a certain fool.”

I wanted to cheat a little, but I guess that’s not an option. Tch.

Ferdinand was watching me with exceptionally cold eyes. I had no choice but to give up and practice seriously so I could whirl on my own.

“Moreover,” he continued, “when the Ahrensbach knights come to the Ehrenfest Dormitory to eat, I would ask you to show your face, commend them for their work, and encourage them.”

“For what reason?”

“To show that you hold no malice toward Ahrensbach and still

intend to serve as its aub.” Some were apparently saying that my decision to rest with Ehrenfest meant I didn’t trust the people of Ahrensbach. “If you smile at the knights and shower them with praise, enveloped in divine mana as you are, then silencing those fools will prove trivial. Our political maneuvering will become that much easier.”

“I suppose I can do that—for your sake.” I added praising Ahrensbach’s knights to my list of duties for the day.

“I would also like the authority to use the teleportation circles between the Adalgisa villa and the Lanzenave Estate so that I might bring supplies to the Royal Academy.”

“But of course,” I replied—just as he plopped a thick stack of documents in front of me.

“Look over these as well; they outline how our meeting with the royals will proceed and what we will ask of them. Memorize them all so you will not need to consult them when the day comes. We must gain what we can from your position as the avatar of a goddess. Our demands here are the bare minimum.”

I sighed, reached for the documents, and said that I would do my best. Ferdinand’s demands were always as tough as they were multitudinous, but I couldn’t complain when he was doing the most work out of any of us.

“I should also mention that I intend to eat here with the archducal family from now on,” Ferdinand noted. “I will say that I am meeting with you to report the status of the villa and Ahrensbach, but I will really be exchanging intelligence with Sylvester and Florencia.”

I nodded. That was fine with me. We needed as much time to discuss things as we could get.

Thus concluded our teatime meeting. Ferdinand returned to the villa without a moment’s hesitation, seemingly quite busy. He wasn’t the only one; there was a mountain of work for me to do as well, so with the help of my retainers, I made my way back to my chambers.

“Lady Rozemyne, it is time for dinner,” Brunhilde announced at sixth bell. “Please allow us to take you.”

And with that, I was subjected to the usual routine: a sheet of silver was thrown over me before Angelica picked me up. But as we started to move, I noticed something unusual.

“This isn’t the way to the dining hall. Where are we going?”

“Because you are bound to be exchanging sensitive information, the archducal family is eating in a separate room,” Brunhilde explained. “Lady Charlotte is managing the logistics. She is terribly worried about you.”

We soon arrived at the meeting room. The door was closed behind us, and the silver cloth wrapped around me was removed. Sylvester, Florencia, Charlotte, and Ferdinand—everyone was here.

“Rozemyne.”

“Sister.”

Florencia and Charlotte immediately lowered their eyes, taken aback in the face of my divine radiance. Sylvester, in contrast, was staring straight at me, the picture of curiosity.

“Talk about a glow-up...” he muttered. “How do you even shine like that?”



Florencia was quick to chastise her husband, but I was relieved to see someone acting normal in the presence of the goddess's power. "I don't know," I said. "To tell you the truth, I can't even see the light. Do I really look that different?"

"I thought Ferdinand was pulling my leg at first, but yeah, I can't argue with you being called the avatar of a goddess..."

Karstedt was standing behind Sylvester and nodding in agreement.

"I'm the same on the inside, though," I assured them both.

"Yeah, it didn't take me long to figure that one out. You're gonna want to avoid speaking whenever you're trying to come across as a divine avatar."

"Father, let us eat," Charlotte interjected. "I am relieved to see the goddess's power has not changed you, Sister. Are you feeling well?" The look in her eyes told me she was just as worried as Brunhilde had suggested.

"Yes, I got plenty of rest and now feel quite refreshed," I replied with a chuckle. "I was told you have been arranging food deliveries to the villa and such while the archducal couple is preparing for our upcoming meeting. I thank you ever so much. If not for your hard work, I would not have been able to rest at all."

I took the seat assigned to me and continued to speak with Charlotte. Much to my relief, we were having familiar Ehrenfest dishes instead of Ahrensbach's intensely spicy cuisine.

Reports and intelligence were commonly exchanged over meals, so Ferdinand took the opportunity to update us on the villa and those in Ahrensbach: "With your permission and the feystone, Rozemyne, we recently activated the villa's teleportation circle."

We now had a transport link between the Lanzenave Estate and the Adalgisa villa. It was a little inconvenient, since the dormitory was still unusable and the villa didn't connect straight to Ahrensbach's castle, but it was drastically better than not being able to access the duchy at all.

"Letters have been sent, and your retainers should come with your belongings in a bell at most."

We had consulted the royal family about using the Adalgisa villa and received permission from Sigiswald to do with it as we pleased. In his words, they had planned to let me have it anyway.

Ferdinand informed us of all this with a smile that couldn't have been more displeased.

"Wonderful," I said. "I thank you ever so much, Ferdinand. Many of my retainers kept their belongings with mine, and it would seem they have been troubled without certain articles. It would also have been troublesome if Ahrensbach alone could not access the Royal Academy to... to... Um, is something the matter, Sylvester?"

He was staring at me. In fact, everyone else was too. Sylvester and Florencia exchanged bewildered looks with Karstedt, seemingly on the verge of a mental breakdown, while Charlotte seemed completely lost for words.

In the end, Karstedt gave Sylvester a grim look of resolve. It must have been a signal of some sort because the uncomfortable archduke then cleared his throat.

"Um... Rozemyne. Ferdinand told us he activated the villa's teleportation circle, right...?"

"That he did. He's registered to Ahrensbach's Mana Replenishment hall. I never thought a goddess would descend and dye my mana, so we're lucky to have him here."

I'd only registered Ferdinand to the Mana Replenishment hall so I could save him; I certainly hadn't expected it to benefit us here at the Academy. Because his mana was registered, he was now considered a member of Ahrensbach's archducal family—its only member, for that matter. He was doing so much for me that I could not do on my own.

My response must not have been what Sylvester was looking for; he turned to Ferdinand instead as if concluding it was pointless to ask me anything else. "Ferdinand... Well, uh... does that mean what I think it means? Did you skip autumn and call winter early without even greeting the supreme gods?"

Rather than answer the question, Ferdinand cocked an eyebrow. "What in the name of the gods has gotten into you? Calm down, man."

"Calm down?! Are you serious?! This is insane!"

Yeeeah... I'm lost. I don't have a clue what's going on.

"Sylvester," Florencia interjected with a polite smile, "you and the other men can go over this later. The rest of us are trying to eat."

Sylvester shut his mouth, well aware that he had just been scolded, then shot Karstedt a glare like the knight commander was

to blame. Ferdinand shook his head, exasperated, and went back to eating.

“Goodness, Father...” Charlotte muttered.

I met my sister’s eye, then chuckled. This whole exchange reminded me of the days before Ferdinand moved to Ahrensbach. There was so much we still needed to do, like meet with the royals, but it felt entirely like we were back in Ehrenfest as I remembered it. The tension drained from my shoulders, and my lips curled into a natural smile.

Epilogue

Under the leadership of their archduke, the knights of Dunkelfelger battled to resolve the Sovereign Order's infighting at the royal palace and then smite Raublut in the Royal Academy's auditorium. Sieglinde was providing rear support, a fact she took great pride in; if not for her immaculate leadership behind the scenes, those on the front lines would not have been able to fight so freely. No matter how wounded someone was, they would survive as long as they reached the rear.

The knights were constantly dependent upon the women of Dunkelfelger. It was a weakness in one way but the key to their strength in another.

Rear support wasn't easy. For their current battle, Sieglinde had prepared recovery rooms in the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, gathered as many magic tools and rejuvenation potions as they could possibly need, requested that provisions be teleported over from the castle, set up a squad of healers, and arranged a rotation of back-line knights to replace anyone who might need to retreat. Now she was overseeing the treatment of the wounded and ensuring their replacements had enough tools and potions.

One by one, ordonnanzes came from those stationed in the dormitory.

"The palace is under our control. We are heading to the auditorium with Lady Magdalena."

"The statues on the altar shone, causing Lady Rozemyne, Lord Ferdinand, and one of our foes to disappear."

"The Sovereign knight commander has been beaten!"

"Lord Ferdinand went to the Sovereign temple with Prince Anastasius. Heisshtize is with them."

"Prince Anastasius has returned. He announced the defeat of our foes and declared the battle to be over. We will now begin the cleanup in shifts."

It was Sieglinde's job to listen to these ordonnanzes and convey their information to Dunkelfelger. She let out a sigh of relief when

one finally said that the fighting had stopped.

“They told us the battle would not last long...” an attendant said. “And indeed, they secured victory in less than a day. But even so...”

“Indeed,” Sieglinde replied with a nod. “There have been unexpected developments in droves. Even the aub had his work cut out for him.”

Werdekraf, the current Aub Dunkelfelger, had said in advance of the battle that it would only be a short one: Rozemyne had stolen Ahrensbach’s foundation, stopping the nobles on Detlinde’s side from joining the fight, and closed its country gate to keep Lanzenave from sending any more troops. She had also played a role in neutralizing the invaders’ ships, meaning they could not even return home. Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, had turned coat, but the entire Order would not join him in his treachery.

In short, the enemy had next to no reinforcements. If attacked and overwhelmed in the deep of the night, they would surely be vanquished in one fell swoop.

Or so they had thought. No sooner had the attack on the Adalgisa villa commenced than a portion of the Sovereign Knight’s Order revolted in the palace, prompting the royal family to call upon Dunkelfelger for aid. As the Zent’s sword, they had responded at once.

The aub had assumed that few knights would rebel against the Zent, even with Raublut as their instigator—but again, he had ended up mistaken. Quite a formidable force had gathered at the palace, and to make matters worse, the enemy had somehow managed to obtain the Grutrissheit. Ordonnanzas had reported the strangest developments, such as water sweeping the battlefield and the sudden disappearance of those atop the altar, and the battle had even been brought to the Sovereign temple for some reason.

How truly bizarre this turned out to be.

In spite of the many detailed reports she had received, Sieglinde had only the slightest grasp of what had actually occurred. She had seen countless ditter matches as the first wife of Dunkelfelger and thought she was used to the twists and turns of battle... but the ordonnanzas had given her cause to reconsider.

“The battle is over for the men but not for us,” Sieglinde announced. “The knights will start returning at any moment.

Prepare them food and places to rest.”

“Understood.”

She sent ordonnances to the common room, where the knights’ attendants were awaiting their charges; to the dining hall, where the food was being kept; and to the knights in the teleportation hall. The returning combatants would rest in shifts, and word of their victory would need to be sent back home.

Werdekraf was last to return from the battlefield; in many regards, the aftermath of a battle was the most complex part, and there were plenty of decisions that would require his input as the aub.

“I am back at last,” he said.

“It is good to see you, Aub Dunkelfelger.”

Before the couple could exchange any more words, Sieglinde raised an eyebrow at Werdekraf. Though he likely hadn’t realized it, his expression was stern, and there was a steely look in his red eyes, like he was ready to spring back into battle at any moment. It seemed wise to distance him from the troops so he could calm down.

“Let us cleanse you before you eat,” Sieglinde said. She beckoned over the attendants, and the aub’s guards changed places with the knights waiting in the dormitory.

The knights back from combat had their attendants clean them, then left for the dining hall. Sieglinde cast a cleansing spell on Werdekraf, but she didn’t take him in the same direction as everyone else; he would need to eat elsewhere.

“How are things here?” Werdekraf asked.

“There were no problems in the dormitory.”

Still instructing her attendants on the side, Sieglinde led the aub to a meeting room. In the wake of a battle—especially one that had involved royalty—it was best for archducal couples to speak in private away from their retainers. Sieglinde started gauging the best time to send them away.

“Hannelore was of great help before dawn,” she continued.

Sieglinde had needed an extra hand with the logistics of their recent battle, so Hannelore had been stationed in the Dunkelfelger Dormitory as her backup. She had endured so many all-nighters for the Purge of Lanzenave, the Battle of Gerlach, and their subsequent victory feasts that her sleep pattern was completely backward. This had ended up being a good thing as it had meant she could take

over while Sieglinde rested.

“She has undone her past dishonor and regained the knights’ trust.”

“A most important development.”

By leading her fellow knights into battle in Ahrensbach and coming out victorious, Hannelore had restored some of their faith in her. Something must have happened to build up her confidence because she had seemed entirely self-assured as she gave everyone in the dormitory their orders. Sieglinde believed that to be the most fruitful result of their alliance with Rozemyne.

“And what of the duchy?” Werdekraf asked while eating.

“Lestilaut must be bored out of his skull in the foundation’s hall.”

Sieglinde directed their attendants to wait outside the room, then looked at her husband with exasperation. “You would say that after forcing him to stay behind?”

Though the risk of anyone invading Dunkelfelger had seemed nonexistent, Lestilaut had needed to spend the entire night in the foundation’s hall due to having inherited the foundational magic as the next archduke. The aub hadn’t given him much of a choice in the matter:

“Ahrensbach had its foundation stolen in less than two bells after Rozemyne led a paltry force to some unknown location. How could we dare leave ours unprotected?”

His concerns were perfectly valid. Hannelore had taken part in the invasion of Ahrensbach, but not even she knew how Rozemyne had reached and stolen its foundation so quickly. Dunkelfelger could not risk leaving its own foundation unguarded.

“It was the logical thing to do,” Werdekraf said in his defense. “Plans had to be made to avoid the worst-case scenario. And in any case, I am sure it was good training for those young knights who had yet to experience a full night on watch.”

“True enough. Your predecessor said much the same.” Starting with the previous aub, the archducal family had agreed to guard Werdekraf’s office while Lestilaut was holed up in the foundation’s hall. “Klassenberg tried to contact us at second-and-a-half bell; their country gate activated, and the Sovereignty was too busy to properly respond to any questions. Of course, you were not there to use the water mirror, so they resorted to a magic letter instead. Here. It came straight from the castle, and their concern is all too apparent.”

The letter had arrived not long after sunrise. Klassenberg assumed their gate's activation had something to do with Werdekraf's earlier call to action and wanted to know whether the situation in the Sovereignty had caused it.

Werdekräf took the letter, read it, and then tossed it aside. "Those reds are as loath to act as always."

"Those in your office replied that our country gate shone in the dead of the night. They did not mention that it happened several days ago or that Lady Rozemyne emerged with the Grutrisheit in hand, but I would not consider that dishonest. Now, pray tell... what actually happened?"

Sieglinde could guess that Rozemyne had done *something* with her Grutrisheit but couldn't even begin to imagine why the young woman would activate Klassenberg's, Gilessenmeyer's, and Hauchletzte's gates in quick succession. Rozemyne had not petitioned the duchies for aid, she had not invaded them, and she had not even opened their gates—she had made them shine and nothing else. Depending on her intentions, some manner of report might need to be sent to every duchy with a country gate.

"Lady Rozemyne was acting upon the instructions of a goddess," Werdekraf replied.

Sieglinde glared at him. "Though you *look* serious, I must confirm this is not some out-of-place jest."

"I am only repeating what Lord Ferdinand told me. Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom descended and took Lady Rozemyne as her avatar, then instructed that the gates be filled posthaste with the mana of a Zent candidate. Yurgenschmidt would collapse otherwise."

"And we intend to believe him...?" Sieglinde asked, unconvinced. The tale seemed to be getting taller and taller. What did it even mean for a goddess to descend and take someone as an avatar?

"I was told that Lady Rozemyne now radiates Mestionora's divine power and that a single glance at her confirms it," the aub hastily added. "Though I confess, I've yet to see it with my own eyes."

Sieglinde pulled a face in lieu of a response, even more certain they were being tricked and exploited.

"Well, um... In any case... We can discuss the goddess's advent later. As keen as they must be for answers, Klassenberg will need to

wait until things have settled down. Duchies that did not participate in the battle are forbidden from visiting the Royal Academy until further notice, and the royal family has made it clear that any trespassers will be deemed enemies and cut down on sight. As it stands, the duchies are stationed in their dormitories trying to gather information, but we shan't tell them anything. Instruct everyone to keep what they know close to their chest."

Those instructions couldn't have been from the royals; Sieglinde assumed they would want allies in Klassenberg and Gilessenmeyer—and all other powerful duchies, for that matter—to help secure their rule. Instead, they were being kept at arm's length. She immediately deduced the truth of the matter.

"Is that to say Lord Ferdinand now controls the entire country?" Sieglinde asked. "He must intend to eliminate anyone who tries to get in his way."

"Indeed. But we subjugated the Sovereign Knight's Order in the palace, rescued the Zent, and smote Raublut. It feels like Lord Ferdinand stole our glory. Though I admire his resolve to do whatever it takes to win, his methods are violent and exceptionally underhanded. I would not mind training with him, but in a battle to the death, I would not want him as an enemy."

Sieglinde's eyes widened at this out-of-character remark. "How rare. You normally boast that a strong foe merely fires you up and practically leap at the first chance to fight them..."

"This man used the battle to gain a political advantage, carefully tweaking his plan as it happened, and then exploited the situation for all it was worth—all while striking his opponents where it hurt most. I would challenge him to a test of strength without a second thought, but a battle of wits? I would not dare put my life and the lives of those I care about on the line when I would end up losing before it even started. Or under any other circumstances, of course."

Werdekraf sighed and set aside his cutlery. The battle must have been intense to have had such a profound impact on his usual way of thinking. Perhaps it was a worthwhile learning experience for him as well as the young knights.

"I intended to make this game of true ditter a spectacle for the ages," he said, "but Lord Ferdinand stopped me at every turn. I just want to rest at this point. Can that be arranged? We keep having more and more jobs unloaded on us."

Sieglinde smiled at her husband's pleading look. "I tried to stop you. Yet rather than listen to me, you declared you would participate no matter the cost and then went on your little rampage. Maybe we should thank Lord Ferdinand for this valuable lesson; it might serve you well to experience the consequences of war."

"But I fought all night. I need to rest."

"Not until you've told me what you know."

Sieglinde wanted information. Much of what the ordonnances had said was still indecipherable, and she refused to wait any longer for an explanation.

"I see," Werdekraf muttered. "Then there is something I should tell you first. Two days from now, we are going to have lunch in Ehrenfest's tea party room. Members of the royal family will also be in attendance."

Sieglinde drew a sharp breath, momentarily lost for words. "This is news to me. Is it already set in stone?"

"We do not have long before the Archduke Conference. Only those who participated in the battle will attend, and we will discuss sensitive matters such as the crowning of the next Zent."

Under normal circumstances, the host and their desired guests would communicate through their attendants and decide on a mutually agreeable date before the former sent any formal invitations. In this case, however, Sieglinde had not been consulted at all. Werdekraf might have spoken with Magdalena after the battle, but the royals had not been able to object.

The royal family had no input, and the venue is Ehrenfest's tea party room?

"Is there a reason Ehrenfest is hosting the event?" Sieglinde managed to ask. "To my knowledge, they did not contribute to the fighting."

Aub Ehrenfest had asked Werdekraf to manage communications with other duchies and the Sovereignty because he was too busy resolving an internal dispute. That was how Sieglinde understood it, at least. It made no sense that Ehrenfest was hosting what would probably be the most important gathering to follow the battle. If, as suspected, Rozemyne planned to rise as Aub Ahrensbach and engage with the royal family as the avatar of a goddess, then this was far from an ideal course of action.

"Lord Ferdinand said it made sense because Ehrenfest agreed to give Lady Rozemyne rear support," Werdekraf noted.

“In other words, they want an excuse to give Ehrenfest a better political foothold.” Sieglinde’s red eyes narrowed. “I was right, wasn’t I? They did not engage in combat.”

Werdekraf waved away the question, not even flinching under his wife’s intense glare. “I do not know how much Ehrenfest did to help Lady Rozemyne, but she is currently resting in its dormitory. Ehrenfest was also first to inform us of the coming invasion—to reveal just how deep this corruption ran—and we could not have seized victory without Lord Ferdinand on our side.”

Sieglinde paused to consider. Ehrenfest really had set the wheels of resistance in motion. And if Rozemyne had chosen to stay in its dormitory over her own, she must not have felt comfortable resting among the nobles of Ahrensbach.

I cannot blame her.

Not even ten days had passed since Rozemyne took Ahrensbach’s foundation, and if what Hannelore had reported was true, she had spent most of that time fighting or bedridden. It seemed unlikely that she had associated with anyone but the knights of her new home, and she was still incapable of saying which nobles she could trust.

Sieglinde pondered the matter, searching for reasons to justify Ehrenfest hosting the tea party. “I was focused on the political implications, since Lady Rozemyne wields a Gruttrissheit and took another duchy’s foundation, but indeed, she is still only as young as Hannelore. It would not be strange for her to rely on her family in Ehrenfest. I suspect she has not had time to relocate her chefs, and the food served varies from duchy to duchy.”

“I think you were right at the start,” Werdekraf replied with a shrug. “Lord Ferdinand now stands dominant over Yurgenschmidt.”

“Oh my. And you let him take the lead, did you? A young member of a middle-ranking duchy like Ehrenfest.”

Ferdinand was competent beyond measure, but there was no denying his current status. Though he had been entrusted with administrative work in both Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach, he had always remained in a position of support, never once attending the Archduke Conference as an authority figure. It was hard to believe that Werdekraf, who had ruled a top-ranking duchy for years, would allow him to pull ahead so easily.

“He is no ordinary assistant; he disappeared in the altar’s light with Lady Rozemyne and Gervasio. The latter two were Zent

candidates with the Grutrissheit, so we can assume the same of him.”

Sieglinde’s eyes widened. Ferdinand wielding the Grutrissheit would completely reverse the balance of power between them. Many critical errors her duchy had made throughout the fight came to mind, and she was struck with the urge to cradle her head. Dunkelfelger no longer held the dominant position, and their next moves would need to consider the chance that Ferdinand might take the throne.

“How likely is Lord Ferdinand to become the next Zent?” she asked.

“I doubt he even wants to, seeing as he tried to thrust the role upon me.”

Sieglinde recalled the terms given to them immediately before the battle—terms that must have come straight from Ferdinand.

“And what are the odds of *you* becoming the Zent, Werdekraf?”

“I cannot say. It will depend on the worth Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne assign to Prince Anastasius and Magdalena, who joined the fight against the invaders. To be frank, I think the matter is entirely up to Lord Ferdinand. The future will depend on whether he chooses to give the Grutrissheit to any of the current royals.”

“What about King Trauerqual?” Sieglinde asked. She found it curious that he hadn’t yet been mentioned, considering his stringent efforts to keep the country together without a Grutrissheit.

“Out of the question, unfortunately...” Werdekraf said, his discomfort clear on his face. “From what Heisshitze told me, he abandoned his duties at the most crucial moment and was thereby deemed a failure of a Zent. Magdalena suspects that trug was used on him; a sweet scent clung to him, and though he looked normal at first glance, certain topics seemed to put him in a trance. He greatly resembled the trug-beset knights who could give only incoherent reasons for their actions.”

“Goodness... Is there a chance Lord Ferdinand might reconsider? Every noble in Yurgenschmidt should know how much King Trauerqual has done—how much he has sacrificed—to keep this country alive.” Sieglinde’s lip trembled as she, too, reflected on the man. Raised a fifth prince, he had neither expected nor wanted the throne and only took the role to put an end to the civil war.

Few had wanted the first prince to become the Zent; he had slaughtered both the second prince and his own sickly father, lost

the Grutrissheit, and started a catastrophic war. So many nobles had stood against him that the third and fourth princes had ultimately been drawn into the conflict.

In the end, the throne had gone to Trauerqual, who had put his all into maintaining the country even as the Sovereign temple focused on his shortcomings. Peace had come to Yurgenschmidt, but there was much that could not be done without a Grutrissheit.

“I understand,” Werdekraf replied, “but were any of the trug-addled knights or nobles forgiven? Not to mention, Lord Ferdinand had his life turned upside down by a royal decree. Do you think he would forgive King Trauerqual for wielding his authority and then abandoning his duty when it mattered most?”

As much as Sieglinde wanted to object, she simply hung her head. She could remember Ferdinand almost losing his mind during the Interduchy Tournament, having been forced to endure Detlinde’s selfish behavior, and the way both Ahrensbach nobles and Lanzenavians had belittled him during the late aub’s funeral.

I doubt he feels any sympathy toward the man who wreaked that upon him.

As always, Trauerqual must have done what was best for Yurgenschmidt—but would that be enough for Ferdinand to forgive him? The man had accepted a cruel royal decree for the peace of his country only for the Zent to up and surrender the foundation.

“We can assume he acted on false information from Raublut,” Werdekraf continued. “But even then, King Trauerqual must be blamed for not seeing through it.”

“Indeed. Ehrenfest will not be quick to forgive him when they rang the warning bell so far in advance. They will consider it his own fault for not gathering adequate intelligence.”

The more authority a person had, the more important it was that they weed out fake friends and verify the information being fed to them. Such were the measures of a competent ruler.

“Going forward,” Werdekraf said, “what Yurgenschmidt needs is a proper Zent with a Grutrissheit. Can you honestly recommend the man who fell victim to trug and gave up on his people? Even I doubt we can leave him in charge any longer.”

The king had achieved much over the past decade, but those victories were irrelevant in his current situation. How long would the influence of the trug last? Might he abandon his duties a second time? Was it even worth trusting him with anything at all...?

“We are the Zent’s sword,” Werdekraf declared. “If the throne is in danger and calls for aid, we shall sortie without delay. But we will not protect a Zent who refuses to carry out his duties. I suspect we will attend the coming meeting as observers and nothing more.”

Sieglinde cast her eyes down, having understood what her husband was trying to say. He would no longer fight for King Trauerqual.

It was said that Dunkelfelger had sworn to be the Zent’s sword as early as the country’s founding. As the Zent would need to dedicate all of their mana to Yurgenschmidt and Erwaermen, they wouldn’t necessarily be able to protect themselves and defeat their foe in the event of an attack. They would need someone to fight for them, so an age-old agreement had been forged. To be Aub Dunkelfelger was to serve as the Twin Blades of Erwaermen, the symbol for the Zent’s own weapon.

“Then will you strive to take over as the Zent, as we discussed prior to the fighting?” Sieglinde asked. “If all goes to plan, we can still save Yurgenschmidt from calamity.”

Werkraf would adopt Hildebrand and then serve as an interim Zent until the boy came of age. The throne would return to the former royal family in a single generation, minimizing the opposition from other duchies.

“That plan is no longer viable. Prince Hildebrand committed a criminal act.”

“Come again?!”

“Raublut got Alstede to register the Lanzenavians as Ahrensbach nobles. Then he instigated Prince Hildebrand to open the Farthest Hall in secret and obtain his schtappe, which allowed the Lanzenavians to acquire theirs as well. A grave crime, considering the circumstances.”

Hildebrand was still a child, but he would not escape such a serious transgression unscathed. He was a royal with retainers hired precisely to avoid such situations.

“But why obtain a schtappe at so young an age? If the prince had waited for his third year, as was advised during the Archduke Conference, he would easily have become better suited to rule than any of his brothers—in terms of elements, divine protections, *and* mana capacity...”

“The mistake was in sending him to a villa after his baptism, no matter how much the royal shortage required it.”

Under normal circumstances, royals were isolated and raised in the northern building of the royal palace, like how archduke candidates were raised in the northern buildings of their respective castles. However, because of the drought of manpower and mana that had plagued Yurgenschmidt since the civil war and purge, the palace had needed to abandon that tradition. Hildebrand and Anastasius had abruptly been entrusted with villas immediately after their baptisms.

Living in the northern building meant eating alongside one's parents and socializing over tea. Upon becoming the lord or lady of a villa, however, one started eating alone, and even tea parties with one's parents would need to be scheduled days in advance. Hildebrand and Anastasius had gone without the guidance children of their age would normally receive.

"So, what will you do if you end up becoming the Zent?" Sieglinde asked.

"If either Prince Sigiswald or Prince Anastasius has children, I would want them to step up to the task. But beyond that, who knows?"

Sieglinde mulled over how dramatically the situation had changed since before the battle, and it was then that she realized something: Anastasius had come up time and time again during the reports she'd received, but not Sigiswald.

"Could there have been a reason that Prince Sigiswald, heir apparent to the throne, was left out of the battle?" she asked. "This is the first you have said about him."

"According to Heisshitze's report, Lord Ferdinand thought Prince Anastasius was easier to spur to action, as the second prince had an easily exploitable weakness. Now that you mention it, however... there does seem to be something more going on."

Werdekraf thought for a moment, then shook his head. "In any case, I can't imagine the first prince being of any use on the battlefield. I saw no reason to bother calling for him."

"Indeed. We could not guess how far his knight training has advanced."

"Not only that—he has his pride as the heir apparent. I doubt he would have given clear orders in the auditorium or on the way to the Sovereign temple, nor do I think he would have listened to Lord Ferdinand and me."

Those who couldn't follow orders were actively harmful on the

battlefield; a single unexpected move could snowball into defeat. An authority figure determined to stay on top when they didn't have the strength to justify it would only have gotten in the way.

"The threat has been contained, but the battle is not entirely over," Werdekraf concluded. "That isn't for us to worry about, though; I'm sure Lord Ferdinand will dominate our meeting with the royals. Our brainstorming here won't amount to anything."

The aub sounded noticeably less energetic than before; the meal and other factors must have been lulling him to sleep. Sieglinde gave him a few light taps on the back of his hand, signaling him to stand. She thought it best to end their conversation so he could go to bed.

"You should rest. I shall oversee the preparations for our upcoming lunch meeting."

"My thanks."

Werdekraf rose to his feet but did not leave. He stared at his wife for a moment... then gently stroked the corner of her eye with his thumb. It was his way of telling her she was working too hard and not getting enough sleep.

Sieglinde looked away. "Is it really that obvious?"

"Not enough that your retainers would notice, but still—you could do with some rest as well." He started to laugh, no longer a soldier at war but a calm, considerate husband.

Sieglinde laughed with him. "Your victory today was superb. Leave everything to me and rest as you please. May Schlaftraum bless you with a deep and peaceful slumber."

The Battle for the Sovereignty

Immanuel — The Returned Branch Royal

In the Sovereign temple, a small white bird sailed into my office. It wheeled above the desk, then turned into a magic letter that fell right in front of me. It must have been from Lord Raublut; I could see his signature green ink on the page. He probably wanted us to tell the royal palace it was time to get ready for Spring Prayer.

Before I could inspect the letter further, Curtiss picked it up and started to read. He was my attendant now that I'd taken over as the High Bishop. As a blue priest, he only aided me with work-related duties—unlike the grays who oversaw my daily life—but he was my attendant all the same.

“Brother Immanuel, there is no name attached to this letter, so I cannot tell who sent it. Its contents are also a mystery to me...”

I took the letter from Curtiss. He had only been doing his job—attendants were obliged to read any correspondence first before passing it along to the High Bishop—but I was displeased with him nonetheless. This letter had come from Lord Raublut, of all people. Though the sender's name was omitted and the contents were coded, I did not want anyone to see it. Especially not Curtiss, who had served Relichion, the former High Bishop, before serving me.

The risk is too great. It was Lord Raublut who dispatched the previous High Bishop.

Relichion had always been a fool. Back when I'd stated my desire for Lady Rozemyne to become the Sovereign High Bishop, he had told me I was speaking nonsense—that *he* was the High Bishop. He was so arrogant and self-centered, and it amazed me even now that he had thought he would stay in his position when Lady Rozemyne entered the temple. As a wielder of the true divine instruments, she was better suited to the role than anyone. Under her guidance, we would be able to perform true, divine rituals once again.

But alas, Relichion had opposed our savior. It made no sense.

He lacked dedication to the gods despite his standing.

Lord Raublut had ultimately deemed the former High Bishop an obstacle to be eliminated; Relichion's general disinterest in reviving the ancient rituals had made him uncooperative when it came to enabling the return of a Zent candidate. In his desperation to remain the High Bishop, he had denied anyone capable of obtaining the Grutrissheit, so Lord Raublut had used poison to silence him for good.

"Brother Immanuel, who sent you that letter?" Curtiss asked, bringing me back to reality. "Do you know?"

"No, I do not recognize this hand," I replied.

Curtiss took the letter back from me, aware that I was asking him to destroy it. But rather than getting straight to work, he stood in place and continued to look at me.

Hmph. How troublesome...

Relichion's death had made Curtiss suspicious—he had taken to reading every message I received—and this confusing anonymous letter had only made that worse. I wanted nothing more than to relieve him of duty and do away with him, but I'd only recently taken over as the High Bishop and wouldn't be able to perform my duties without him. I would need to wait at least a year, much to my distaste.

"Curtiss, send a letter to the royal palace: I wish to visit the Royal Academy to start preparing for Spring Prayer. Extol the importance of the ritual and stress that we *must* go there without delay."

He stared at the letter, then at me, then cautiously stood down. I gave further instructions to the other attendants, slowly clearing the room.

Once everyone was gone, I stood up and quickly approached a nearby door, which I opened with the key I wore around my neck. Beyond it was a storage room meant for objects that only the High Bishop could use, so I was the only one able to enter it. This room was why Lord Raublut had sought the aid of the Sovereign High Bishop. Relichion had refused and died, so I had taken the role in his place.

I looked around, then headed to where the medals of those who had gone to Lanzenave were kept. Two white medals sat inside flat boxes.

"The newest of these two would be... this one."

I picked up one of the medals, stuck it inside a storage box, and then returned to the office. I would now be able to retrieve it right away when the royal palace permitted our entry to the Royal Academy. Curtiss would not find the mere existence of a box suspicious; I stashed it inside my desk and pondered the person registered to the medal within.

I suppose the new Zent candidate has returned, as per Lord Raublut's plan.

Indeed, the medal apparently belonged to a new Zent candidate—a member of a royal branch family who left Yurgenschmidt upon coming of age to become the king of Lanzenave but would return to obtain the Grutrissheit and rule as a true Zent. This meant there were now three candidates, the other two being Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach, who had caused the Zent-selecting circle to flash, and Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest, who performed rituals with the true divine instruments.

Lord Raublut normally attended when King Trauerqual was given reports or participating in discussions, so he knew how to obtain the Grutrissheit and the requirements one had to meet. The information he had given me reached so far beyond what I could research on my own that I could not verify it, but it was said that only a royal born with all elements could receive the Grutrissheit. Lady Rozemyne had come exceptionally close only to be denied at the last moment for not being a royal. King Trauerqual planned to remedy that by adopting her during the next Archduke Conference.

How ridiculous.

Lady Rozemyne was the perfect candidate to become the Sovereign High Bishop and revive the old rituals. I could not bear the thought of the royal family stealing her away from me, which was why I'd agreed to cooperate with Lord Raublut.

If this branch royal obtains the Grutrissheit, nothing will stand in the way of Lady Rozemyne entering the Sovereign temple.

I recalled the gleam of the true divine instruments she had wielded and sighed, overcome with bliss. In her hands, Flutrane's staff sparkled with green light—something I'd never seen from our temple's replica. And then there was her spectacle with the cape of Darkness and the crown of Light. My chest grew hot, and my body trembled with excitement.

I wanted Lady Rozemyne. The temple deserved her. There was no one better suited to serving the gods as the Sovereign High

Bishop.

My deal with Lord Raublut was simple: I would help his branch royal obtain the Grutrissheit in return for Lady Rozemyne. A saint able to perform true rituals would become the Sovereign High Bishop, I would assist her as the High Priest, and together we would revive what the rest of the country had forgotten.

I was dying for that day to come.

We received permission to enter the Royal Academy three days after Lord Raublut sent his letter. Under normal circumstances, a scholar would arrange our visit immediately, but an unusual matter had delayed us. The royal family seemed to be in some kind of danger, and we had needed to wait until everything was deemed safe.

To reach the altar at the back of the auditorium, we of the Sovereign temple had to pass through the royal palace. We were following behind a scholar with a feystone that would open the doors in our path. It was our duty to perform divine rituals, but at times like this, we could not help feeling disrespected.

“Oh?”

We arrived at the usual meeting room in the palace to find two princes, each with his guard knights, and quite a substantial crowd of Sovereign knights. I was unsure why they had all gathered, but seeing Lord Raublut with them told me it must have been part of his plan.

“Let us depart,” Prince Anastasius said.

We went with him to the auditorium, Sovereign knights all around us. There were more knights stationed outside the teleportation doors that connected to the dormitories.

“Tensions seem fairly high today. Did something happen?” I asked.

“That is not for you to know,” Lord Raublut shot back, his curt response likely meant to hide our cooperation from the others. Despite his tone, he seemed to be in fairly high spirits; his plan must have been going well.

“I will open the door,” Prince Hildebrand announced once we were inside the auditorium, then took out a feystone and opened the door leading to the Farthest Hall. We passed through the iridescent barrier, and the statues of the gods came into view. “Here we are. Begin.”

From here, we were normally left to our own devices, but there were Sovereign knights standing by the walls and watching our every move. Even Prince Anastasius kept his narrowed gray eyes on us. The blue priests were uncomfortable with being the center of attention and worked slowly as a result.

“Curtiss—pay no mind to the Sovereign knights,” I said. “We might not know why they are here, but they are merely doing their job. We need only do ours as well.”

“That is true, but—”

“Spring Prayer cannot be performed without our preparations. We must start by cleansing the altar.”

I gave everyone clear instructions, and the blue priests began their work in silence. They cleansed the altar, laid out offerings, and checked the mana gathered in the statues’ divine instruments. They forgot about the Sovereign knights watching them and worked in perfect harmony.

Prince Anastasius surveyed us for some time, then nodded and said, “Right. Raublut, I shall do as Father instructed and inspect the rest of the Royal Academy. Look after Hildebrand in my absence.”

“As you will, Your Highness. I must ask that you bring these knights with you and your guards; the search should go quicker if you divide it between yourselves. The first and second squads will stick with you while the third and fourth protect Prince Hildebrand. The fifth and sixth squads will guard the hallway.”

The knights moved as Lord Raublut instructed. Prince Hildebrand watched as more than half of them departed with Prince Anastasius, then turned to the Sovereign knight commander.

“Raublut, where is Anastasius going?”

“To patrol the Royal Academy’s grounds. He was tasked not only with keeping an eye on the Sovereign temple but also with checking the Academy to see whether the Zent can safely return to his usual schedule. King Trauerqual is prepared to lower the royal palace’s guard if a prince confirms nothing is out of the ordinary.”

“We would welcome an end to the lockdown,” said one of Prince Hildebrand’s attendants. “Our lines of communication have been limited since the palace was completely sealed.”

The prince seemed too distracted to respond; he nodded and said, “I see” while staring enviously at the door.

“Prince Hildebrand, you have your own duties to perform in the meantime,” Lord Raublut said.

"I do?" he asked, his eyes full of hope. Though he was a prince, he was also still a child; he must have been bored standing around.

"The Zent has at last given you his permission. You may use this time to obtain your schtappe."

"Truly?!"

"Lord Raublut, is that true...?"

Prince Hildebrand celebrated, but his attendants had their guard up. Their skepticism was short-lived, however, as Lord Raublut had prepared an excuse.

"We do not know when Prince Hildebrand might be put in danger. A schtappe will allow him to call for aid or protect himself. At the very least, it will make it easier for him to reach a teleportation door. Arthur—you know what Lady Eglantine went through, I expect."

"I don't, Raublut," the prince interjected. "What happened with Eglantine?"

A solemn look clouded the knight commander's face as he shared the story—an account of the civil war, when an invasion had shaken the villa of the third prince at the time. The prince in question had succumbed to poison while eating dinner, as had those in his family who had dined with him. Their retainers had devoted themselves to nursing their dying charges and searching for the culprit.

As an unbaptized child, Lady Eglantine had instead taken her meal in the playroom. For that reason, she and she alone had survived. The first prince's forces had then attacked, despite the fact he had already been defeated, so Lady Eglantine had raced through the villa, eventually opening the teleportation door to the Royal Academy to allow Klassenberg's knights through.

"I never knew she had to go through something so awful..." Prince Hildebrand said.

"If she had obtained her schtappe sooner, she would have been in a better position to defend herself. She might even have reached the teleportation door without losing her nurse. The Zent is treating this state of emergency with the utmost seriousness and wants nothing more than for Prince Hildebrand to be prepared. My subordinates were there when he gave the order."

Lord Raublut then turned to his knights. "He states the truth," one said, while the others nodded in agreement.

"We were told to stay with you and ensure that no harm befalls

you,” another added.

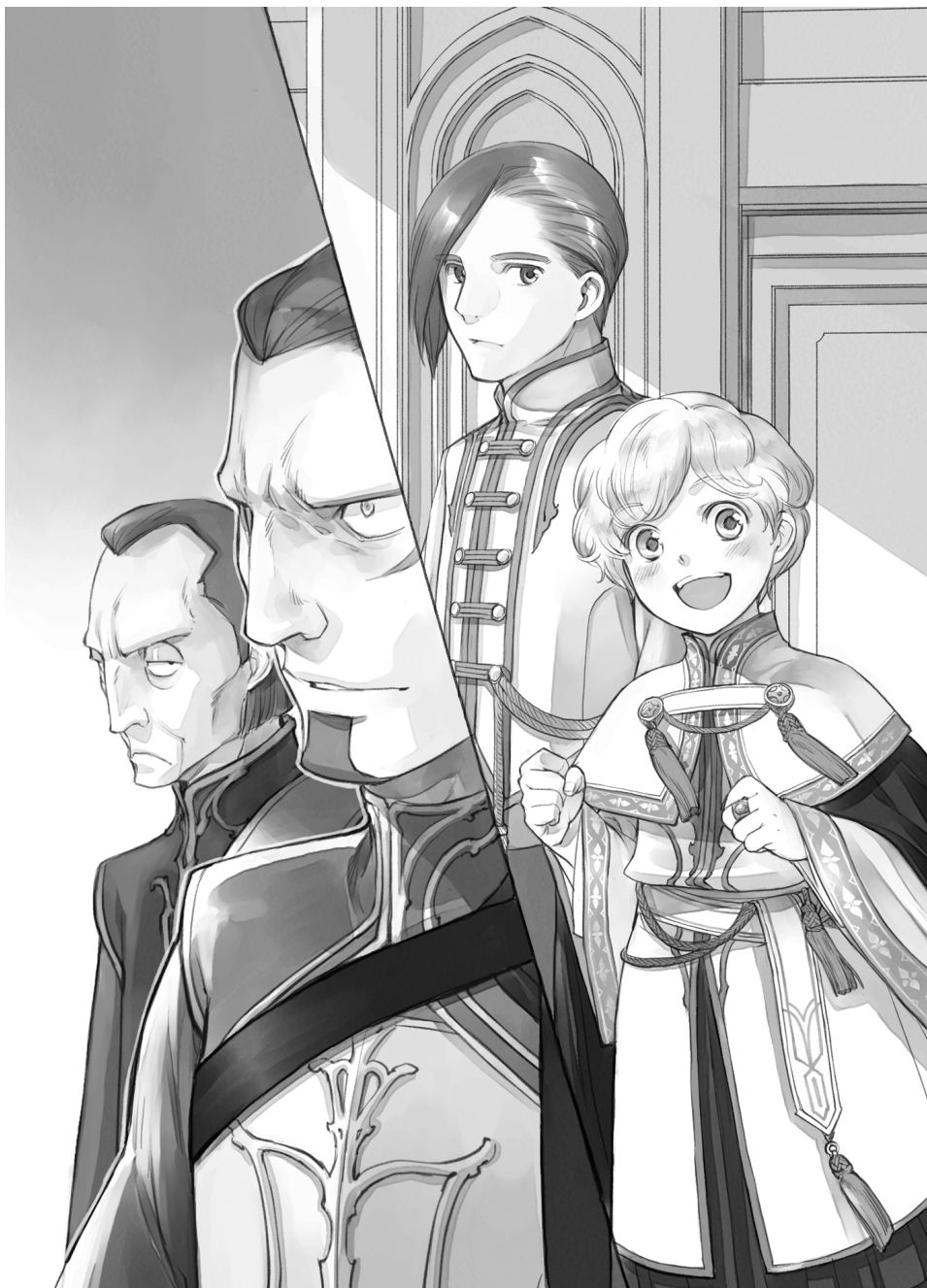
“I never thought Father would allow this...” Prince Hildebrand said, a smile forming on his face. “He always told me no.”

I could tell from the look on Lord Raublut’s face that this was another part of his scheme, but the others were none the wiser. Everyone trusted the Sovereign knight commander and saw no reason to question him further.

“The Zent has his own ideas,” Lord Raublut said. “I told you this day would come—when the time was right, of course.”

“Yeah! Let’s go, Arthur!”

The Sovereign knights still in the auditorium split into two groups: those who would go with Prince Hildebrand and those who would continue to watch over us. The prince eagerly absorbed a quick tutorial on how to obtain his schtappe, then practically skipped to the side of the altar with his retainers and the Sovereign knights. I could not see how from where I was standing, but they opened a hole in the wall and then proceeded inside.



Is... that it...?

My breath caught in my throat. The Sovereign temple had authority over the Royal Academy's altar, but we had never been told about its proximity to the place where schtappes were obtained.

Is that really where they come from?

Schtappes served as proof that one was a noble. They were necessary to wield true divine instruments and existed as the means by which one's prayers could reach the gods. Would obtaining one allow me to create divine instruments? Would my words reach the gods more easily? My eyes were locked on the entrance ahead of me, and my legs started carrying me toward it.

"That place is for nobles, not you," Lord Raublut said. Hearing his voice was like being doused in ice water. The flames of my enthusiasm faded as I thought about everything that would always be out of my reach no matter how much I prayed to the gods.

Resentment and envy toward nobles swelled in my heart, but I couldn't let my anger show; even the slightest outburst would spoil everything. I refrained from looking Lord Raublut in the eye and simply flashed the small box I was keeping hidden.

"Could you keep the other blue priests at a distance?" I asked. "They suspect my involvement in Relichion's death."

Lord Raublut chopped the air, and the knights moved into a formation that would stop the Sovereign priests from approaching us. Anyone on the outside would probably assume the Sovereign Order was interrogating me.

I opened the box and produced a medal, holding it so that the Sovereign priests wouldn't be able to see it. "So, who does this belong to?"

"Him," Lord Raublut said, indicating the Sovereign knight who had just stepped toward us.

Aaah. So this man disguised as a knight is the new Zent candidate.

Though a helmet covered most of his face, the features I could see spoke to royalty. Still, I could not act on trust alone; I needed confirmation that this man was a branch royal. Lord Raublut had said that giving this future Zent his medal was necessary for him to obtain the Grutrissheit.

Does he or does he not have the capacity to become a true Zent?

That was what mattered to me. If this man really was an omni-elemental branch royal, he would become a true Zent, dispel the false King Trauerqual, and reward me by sending Lady Rozemyne to the Sovereign temple.

“If you would channel your mana into this...” I said.

The man formed his schtappe and tapped the medal, making it glow with the light of all elements. A moment later, a knight watching us from a distance came forward, his arms crossed and a most dubious look on his face.

“Is this medal alone truly enough to confirm he is a branch royal?”

“Lord Blasius,” the knight commander said. He sounded critical, but his use of a title confirmed this man was no member of the Sovereign Order. I did not recognize him—my knowledge of nobles was spotty at the best of times—but I could answer his question.

“This man is the branch royal who went to Lanzenave, and the mana within him is omni-elemental. There can be no mistaking it.”

“Then the plan is still on?” Lord Blasius asked, speaking not to me but to Lord Raublut.

“Yes. He will need to circle the Royal Academy’s shrines and go to the archive under the library. Only omni-elemental royals can enter the room with the Grutrissheit, so there is no chance of anyone beating us to it. The archduke candidate from Ehrenfest still needs King Trauerqual to adopt her.”

“Good.”

Lord Blasius took a step back. He, too, needed the branch royal to obtain the Grutrissheit. Lord Raublut saw that as his end goal, but this faux Sovereign knight seemed to have something else in mind.

“In any case,” I said, “this man is who he claims to be. Upon my return to the temple, I will move his medal from the box for Lanzenavians to the box for members of the royal branch families. That should grant him the same level of access as any other branch royal.”

“Do it fast.”

“As you wish.”

I stashed the medal in its box, which I then put away. I would need to reregister the medal—a simple enough process most commonly done for weddings or when a noble rose in status. I could do it here and now, but it seemed more sensible to return to

the temple first. I wanted to keep the medal in the Sovereign temple's custody in case circumstances required me to hand it over to King Trauerqual.

The knights surrounding me broke formation, allowing my return to the altar where the blue priests were working.

"Did something happen?" Curtiss asked.

"I was questioned about Lord Relichion's death. The Sovereign Order thought it might be relevant to their current plight."

"I see..." he replied at length.

"Brother Immanuel, we have finished our work," one of the blue priests announced.

Curtiss joined me as I started inspecting the altar. He did not probe any further.

A short while after we of the Sovereign temple completed our business, I heard the quiet footsteps of a child. Prince Hildebrand had returned.

"Raublut, look. I got mine," the third prince said, a broad smile on his face as he held some manner of tube close to his chest. His retainers stood around him in a circle, though they appeared to be keeping their distance.

"Any incidents?" Lord Raublut asked.

"One group went to check the farther reaches of the tunnel, and we have yet to hear back from them," a knight replied. "Those of us who stuck with the prince have nothing to report."

The knight was standing unusually far away from Lord Raublut and appeared to be holding the same tubular object as Prince Hildebrand. It was obvious to me, but the prince's retainers seemed entirely focused on their lord, taking care not to get too close to him.

"Prince Anastasius has not yet returned," Lord Raublut informed the third prince. "Nonetheless, I would advise you to return to your villa to avoid any unnecessary contact."

"Arthur, what do you think? I was told to lock the auditorium, but should we do as Raublut says?"

"Indeed. We cannot touch you until you have absorbed your schtappe, so you might not be able to touch the feystone to the door."

The prince let out a small cry of realization; because he was so short, his retainers had needed to pick him up before he could

unlock the door. “In that case, I agree—we should take our leave early.”

Lord Raublut nodded. “As some of my subordinates have yet to return from the tunnel, I shall look after the feystone and give it to Prince Anastasius when he returns.”

“Thank you,” Prince Hildebrand replied. He took the feystone from a pouch on his hip and then approached Lord Raublut, prompting his retainers to cry out and the knight commander to lurch back.

“No! You must not touch anyone!”

“The floor! Please put it on the floor.”

“Goodness. My heart... Let us hurry back to the villa.”

In contrast to those around him, the prince remained perfectly calm. “I almost messed up...” He set the feystone on the floor, then gazed upon it with regret. “Opening and closing the door was one of the few important jobs I could actually do...”

“Perhaps you could send the Sovereign priests back to the temple. You will get the satisfaction of having done something important, and Prince Anastasius will understand your need to leave early.”

“Right!”

Prince Hildebrand gave a firm nod, prompting his attendant to send an ordonnanz to the second prince stating their intention to depart with the Sovereign priests. A reply of acknowledgment came moments later.

“We must be off, then. If you will excuse us.” I gave customary farewells to Lord Raublut and those with him, then left the auditorium with the third prince.

Immediately upon returning to the temple, I reregistered our future Zent’s medal and moved it to the storage area for branch royals. Lord Raublut sent me a magic letter the next evening.

“My lord received the Goddess of Wisdom’s invitation. Prepare for his coronation.”

“Brother Immanuel, what do you believe this means?” Curtiss asked, his brow furrowed.

I could no longer hide my exasperation. Lord Raublut sounded so giddy that I wanted to ask where his extreme caution had vanished to. “Tell me what you think it means, Curtiss.”

“Taken at face value, Mestionora has invited a Zent candidate

somewhere. We have waited an entire decade, but... has the Grutrissheit been found at last?"

"I do not know, nor do I expect the Sovereign temple to ever receive the details. They treat us as tools to perform religious ceremonies. That said, if a Zent with the Grutrissheit truly has been born... we should rejoice, should we not?"

Curtiss sighed. We both knew how much the nobles exploited us. Lord Raublut had only told me so much, meaning not even I understood what the invitation would entail. If nothing else, it seemed safe to assume the branch royal had obtained the Grutrissheit.

A thrill ran down my spine. I was forbidden from becoming a noble, but it was by my hand that a new Zent would take the throne. How could anyone protest the revival of ancient rituals now? Lady Rozemyne would soon be the Sovereign High Bishop, and under her leadership, the Sovereign temple would rise above the nobility.

Trembling with excitement at the thought of coming even closer to the gods, I returned the letter to Curtiss and instructed him to destroy it.

Anastasius — The Royal Family's Position

"Anastasius, this is Ralfrieda. Lady Magdalena reports a battle at the royal palace. She has called on Dunkelfelger for assistance, but keep your villa sealed so that no enemies break in. Stay safe."

My mother, the Zent's first wife, had contacted me in the dead of the night. I sprang out of bed, scaring Eglantine so much that she screamed.

We had recently been warned that Lanzenavians and Ahrensbach nobles were coming to the Sovereignty to obtain the Grutrissheit, and my dear wife had been a mess ever since. She spent every night as scared as a little girl, fearing the battle to come. Her screams, born from the terrors of the civil war now dominating her thoughts, drowned out the repeats of my mother's message.

I pulled my trembling sweetheart into my embrace, all the while noting the night watch on the other side of the bed-curtain. "Eglantine, take deep breaths. Look around. You're not alone this time. I'm here. I won't let any harm come to you or our beautiful

daughter Stephareine. You have my word.”

“Anastasius...”

The attack that had scarred my wife so deeply had occurred late at night, and its echoes lingered even to this day. Ehrenfest’s warning had put her on edge, so to help her cope as best we could, we had tripled my villa’s night watch, sealed its entrances every night, and started sleeping not in nightwear but in clothes we could wear outside.

“Thanks to our increased guard, we can move without needing to worry about anyone invading the villa,” I said. “There is nothing to fear. You need only watch over Stephareine. As her father, I will protect the villa without fail.”

“Stephareine... Yes, you are right. Our villa has not yet been attacked.”

Eglantine stood tall and repeated that she had nothing to fear—that she was no longer alone, that she had a daughter to protect, and that she could use her schtappe to defend herself. At the same time, she touched her light feystone armor, formed and dispelled her schtappe, and put on shoes. She would not let her traumas and anxiety win.

She seems calmer now.

I gave my brave wife a kiss, hoping to comfort her further, and then turned to one of my attendants on night watch. “I’m going out to take a look. I leave Eglantine and Stephareine in your care.”

I exited the room, bringing only my knight Mergitor; the guards on watch had told him about Mother’s ordonnanz while I was calming Eglantine. There were knights rushing up and down the corridor, sending messages this way and that. My head guard knight, Haland, was among them.

“Haland,” I said, “are the teleportation door and the gates secure?”

“Yes, Your Highness. The teleportation door is sealed, and no intruders have been seen approaching the gates. There is no movement in the duchies either.”

The villas under royal management were positioned at the border between the Sovereignty and its surrounding duchies. Thus far, we had primarily needed to be wary of our neighbors, but an attack from within the palace meant we would need to keep an eye on that direction as well. For now, at least, nobody was advancing on us.

“If Lady Magdalena has called upon Dunkelfelger, then defending this villa should be as simple as denying all teleportation requests before the fighting concludes in the royal palace. Focus your attention on defending the gates.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Halander left to start giving orders, at which point Mergitor advised me to return to my room. “The villa does not seem to be in danger at the moment, so perhaps you should get ready to join the fight. You are equipped to go outside but not to do battle, and the royal palace could summon you at any moment. Now is the best time to prepare.” He gestured at my hair for good measure; I’d rushed out of bed so suddenly that it was still unkempt.

Heeding his advice, I returned to my room—where my head attendant, Oswin, began cleaning me up. “Still, where in the world could the invaders have come from?” he mused. “I thought the royal palace was sealed again yesterday when those intruders were found at the Royal Academy.”

I ruminated. Once sealed, the royal palace was immune to intrusion except through its villas. It blocked magic tools, so contacting those inside by letter or water mirror was out of the question. Not even correspondence from the Royal Academy would make it through; it was solely the villas’ duty to communicate with the palace while it was sealed and keep those inside up-to-date.

Though I could not guess the reason, the royal palace was equipped specifically to fight an invasion from the Royal Academy.

“The other villas must also be on high alert,” I replied, “so I doubt our foes came through any of our neighboring duchies. Maybe they struck when the guards stationed at the Royal Academy changed places.”

“That is most likely. Once you have changed into your armor, shall we go to the palace to provide our support?”

I paused and said, “No. I will aid them only at their request. Otherwise, I would rather not leave my villa understaffed.” The sparks flying at the royal palace could ignite a battle here as well, and staying inside would make the villa infinitely easier to defend.

A second ordonnanz arrived just as I finished changing.

“This is Ralfrieda. Lady Magdalena reports that *Raublut* is behind the attack on the palace! The Sovereign Knight’s Order is fighting itself!”

“Lord Raublut?! The knight commander?!” exclaimed all those

who heard, their eyes wide open.

My eyes shot open too. “Was he sheltering the traitors while he claimed to be watching over the Royal Academy?!” He had spent most of his time there the past few days.

My blood started to boil. Our true enemy had manipulated us. Back when Ehrenfest warned Sigiswald of the coming invasion, Raublut proposed sealing the palace and ordered us to take shelter in our villas. Had he asked Hildebrand and me to check the Royal Academy so he could reduce the number of guards there? He had also advised sealing the palace a second time when one of the professors spotted intruders.

It had seemed only natural that Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, would oversee the defense of the palace. Not a single person had questioned his orders.

“Prince Anastasius, what shall we do?” Mergitor asked. “Given their status as Sovereign knights, Raublut and those with him can easily enter the palace. The villas, on the other hand, should not be as at risk. We will need to adjust our defense arrangements and seriously consider giving the palace our aid...”

Raublut wouldn’t have access to this villa without permission from Eglantine or me. If we closed the teleportation door connected to the palace, he would need to approach us by land—not that we were likely to be attacked in the first place. If anyone, Sigiswald would be next on the firing line, as he was the heir apparent.

“Rather than open the teleportation door to the palace, we should go through the door connected to the Royal Academy. Taking a detour should minimize the risk to the villa.”

First bell rang as we reconsidered our defenses, and another ordonnanz soon followed. We were all on tenterhooks as we waited to hear what it would reveal.

“Prince Anastasius, this is Ferdinand. To prevent our Lanzenavian invaders from stealing Yurgenschmidt’s foundation, I need a royal to open the Farthest Hall. As you should know from the aftermath of the civil war, in the event that our enemies succeed, the usurped royals—your family—will immediately be sought out and executed. I would ask that you come immediately and make great haste.”

“What?!” came a shout. “Invaders from Lanzenave are going to steal the foundation?!”

“The Farthest Hall, not the royal palace? Just what is going on

here?!”

The ordonnanz caused an immediate stir. It repeated its message twice, making no mention of the rebellion in the royal palace.

“Does this mean the fighting in the royal palace is a diversion?” one knight asked, anxious. “Is their true objective the Royal Academy?”

I took in a sharp breath. The shrines Rozemyne had circled to obtain the Grutrissheit were located at the Royal Academy, and the magic tools in its library had acknowledged her success. For days, Raublut had stood guard over its grounds, forbidding anyone else from even getting close.

“We shall march not to the palace but to the Royal Academy’s Farthest Hall,” I announced. “Mergitor, consult Haland. Find out how many knights we can bring and tell them to gather outside the door to the Academy.”

“At once!”

I went to the playroom and called for Eglantine. She came out with Stephareine in her arms... and stared at me in surprise.

“Prince Anastasius,” she said, “you are armored...”

“The enemy seems to be targeting the Farthest Hall. As a royal, I must join the fight against them; I cannot let an outsider steal Yurgenschmidt’s foundation. I ask that you wait here for my return. We are leaving as many knights as we can to guard you.”

She looked at me with pleading eyes, then hesitantly said, “May Angriff guide you.” Her arms trembled as she held Stephareine, but this was something I needed to do. Both their lives were at stake.

As I turned around to leave, my dear wife called out again:

“I shall await your return.”

I threw open the door to the Royal Academy’s auditorium, having taken Rozemyne’s advice and covered my mouth with cloth. For reasons I couldn’t understand, all those inside were fighting with their feet squarely on the ground. There wasn’t a single highbeast in sight, which made it harder to gauge how many knights were doing battle and which of them were against us. More people wore silver capes than black, likely because the traitors of the Sovereign Knight’s Order were concentrated in the royal palace.

And those with silver capes are the foreign invaders Raublut aligned with...?

The battle was more of a free-for-all than expected. I stood at the door, scanning the room in a hopeless attempt to identify our foes, and it was then that I noticed the unusual appearance of the auditorium. The stage for dedication whirls, the audience seats, and the altar were all visible—as would normally be the case for the graduation ceremony.

Who did this and why?

A sudden feeling of dread swept through me. To change the auditorium, one needed royal permission and the proper feystone.

“Prince Anastasius, why are you here?!” one of Dunkelfelger’s knights shouted. “Please wait outside!”

“How fares our aub in the royal palace?” asked another as they moved to protect us.

“The Divine Avatar of Mestionora decreed that royals should stand on the front line, so here I am. More importantly... there might be a traitor in my family. The auditorium could not have taken this form unless Raublut was granted the necessary feystone.”

“Impossible...” my guards muttered, shuddering at the thought. The significance of this rebellion would change dramatically if a royal was behind it, but one of Dunkelfelger’s knights put our minds at rest.

“It was likely Prince Hildebrand who gave him the feystone. He was manipulated—one of the traitors testified to it.”

I suddenly remembered my half-brother with the feystone for opening and closing the auditorium; he had used it when the Sovereign priests visited the Royal Academy to prepare for a ceremony. I thought back to the proud smile on his face and then the ordonnanz announcing he would take his leave while I patrolled the Academy.

It was then?!

Raublut had come to me soon after and said that he would patrol as well, having escorted Hildebrand to the teleportation door.

The nerve.

Anger surged within me. What would have happened to Hildebrand if the attempts to manipulate him hadn’t worked and Raublut had elected to take the feystone by force? Nobody would ever have expected the commander of the knights dedicated to protecting the royal family to use such methods against them, but that didn’t matter; even just being tricked would tarnish the young prince’s reputation.

“Raublut!” I roared. “You will pay for this!” I raised my weapon and sprinted toward the whirling stage, where he was doing battle with Ferdinand’s group.

“Prince Anastasius! Wait!”

Together with my guard knights, I tried to push through the foes ahead of us. Our mana attacks were almost always blocked, and our schtappe-made weapons merely bounced off of our opponents’ bodies.

“Beware the silver capes and weapons!” our allies shouted. “Mana can’t penetrate or defend against them! And don’t use your highbeasts—our foes have weapons that can pierce straight through them!”

Again, I inspected my surroundings. Nobody was using schtappe weapons or even attempting to make their highbeasts.

Seriously, Rozemyne?! You could have warned me!

We changed our approach, this time wresting the weapons from our enemies’ hands. We wouldn’t be able to fight without first procuring usable alternatives to our schtappes. But even once we’d rearmed ourselves, our foes were too numerous for us to easily reach their leader.

Have all these Sovereign knights turned their back on Father?

To my frustration, not all of our opponents were foreigners; I recognized several faces from the Sovereign Knight’s Order. They wore silver capes instead of black and stood defiantly against me, a member of the royal family.

Ridiculous!

With the support of my knights and our Dunkelfelger allies, I finally reached the stage. I raced up its stairs, driven by my anger.

“Oh, Prince Anastasius...” Raublut said, taunting me. “I thought you would either hole up in your villa with your beloved wife or charge the palace in a righteous fury... To think you came here instead.” He threw something at Ferdinand’s group and then barked orders to those nearby: “Defeat the king’s enemies! Don’t let them near this place!”

The black- and silver-capes with Raublut moved at once, knocking away my allies but completely ignoring me. My knights tumbled down the stairs while Ferdinand’s group was blown back by the explosive winds of a magic tool. Soon enough, only Raublut and I remained on the stage.

“*Schwert*,” I said, my eyes fixed on my opponent. Knowing he

served my father had always brought me comfort, but not anymore. “How could you betray your king?! Your duties as his knight commander?!”

Neither my words nor my sudden lunge broke Raublut’s composure; he batted me aside as easily as when he had used to train me in swordplay. “I do not consider this a betrayal. My loyalties have always lain with King Gervasio. Those who thought otherwise have only themselves to blame.”

I was rattled. The Sovereign knight commander had just named a man other than the Zent—my father—as his lord. He declared that the foreign invader was not merely his co-conspirator but the one to whom he had sworn his allegiance. It made no sense.

I took a step back and pointed my sword at him again. It trembled in my hand; I was too shaken to stop it. “As a Sovereign knight, you are duty bound to serve the king. How can you side with someone from another country...?”

“King Gervasio is a member of Yurgenschmidt’s extended royal family. He was the first man I served.”

Raublut had been the knight commander for as long as I could remember; I’d never stopped to consider his life before he took the role. As I understood it, my mother had put him forward because he was from her home duchy of Gilessenmeyer, and she believed my father would be safest with a Knight’s Order led primarily by those of a shared origin. She had spoken to his experience serving a branch royal—and the fact that said royal was no more.

“I thought your lord passed away,” I said.

“I once served Lady Valamarlene. The previous Zent spread word that she had died, then Trauerqual made it so during the purge that followed the civil war. My true lord, King Gervasio, left the country to rule Lanzenave, but he returned just recently.”

Raublut’s reddish-brown eyes lit up as he spoke. He didn’t consider me a royal; both his speech and this playful sparring match conveyed more than anything that he saw me as beneath him. I gritted my teeth and blocked his swing with my sword.

“You had a hand in that, I assume. Exchanging words with Lanzenave is no easy feat. How long have you been planning this?!”

“It was during a trip to Ahrensbach that I finally succeeded. From there, Lady Georgine served as our go-between.”

After the ternisbefallen attack at the Interduchy Tournament, an investigation team had noticed signs that Old Werkestock’s

teleportation circle had been used. The Sovereign Knight's Order had followed up on the matter by visiting the two duchies responsible for its territory: Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger.

The knight commander turned coat at the instigation of a first wife... It almost beggars belief.

"So were you the one who used trug on the Sovereign knights?" I asked. "The ones who interfered in a Royal Academy ditter match and suddenly became violent during Ahrensbach's funeral."

"Yes. To dispatch those in my way and reward Lady Georgine for her continued cooperation."

From Lanzenave to Ahrensbach to the Sovereign Knight's Order—the flow of trug was all too clear to me now. Raublut, who had deemed the incidents unacceptable and demanded their immediate investigation, was actually to blame for them. Ehrenfest had been right all along.

No matter how long this fight went on, I doubted I would ever win. I also doubted we would ever come to understand each other. But as a member of royalty, it was my duty to stand my ground and defend my country.

"You've spread trug through the ranks of the Order, incited a rebellion in the royal palace, and transformed the auditorium. What are you plotting?!"

"My lord received an invitation from the Goddess of Wisdom. I merely set the stage for the return of a true Zent."

Raublut's response made no sense to me. His reference to Mestionora's invitation and a true Zent made it clear he was trying to obtain the Grutrissheit, but the strongest theory claimed it was in the underground archive beneath the Royal Academy's library. He had no reason to be in the auditorium.

"Do you think I would believe that?!" I shouted. "Only the royal family can enter the underground archive! State your true intentions!"

"One need not be a royal to be recognized by the Goddess of Wisdom. I am here to welcome my lord when he returns."

Was that why he stole the feystone key from Hildebrand, or was that all part of some other scheme? There was no end to my questions, but my anger would do nothing to answer them; I could neither stop nor imprison Raublut on my own. I was so powerless that I almost wanted to cry.

"As always, you let your emotions get the better of you,"

Raublut said, sounding like both a sword instructor and someone mocking an opponent so far beneath him. He dodged my thrust, slammed one foot against the floor, and then used the momentum to launch a kick. It caught me while I was off-balance and sent me flying.

“And as always,” he continued, “it leaves you wide open.”

Raublut sneered as I scrambled to my feet, but his expression changed when I raised my sword. He was looking right past me, his eyes locked on something else entirely. He had not flinched once when facing me in combat, but now he looked tense and quickly moved to grab something.

“Just how much will you endure...?” he murmured. “As the Sovereign knight commander, I must protect the true Zent. There is no future for those who would oppose King Gervasio!”

He was speaking not to me but to Ferdinand’s group, who were trying to pull a maneuver on the enemy knights surrounding us. I realized then that Raublut was holding a magic tool. I didn’t know how long he had been channeling mana into it—the entire time we were fighting, maybe?—but it seemed ready to explode.

“Brace yourselves!” Ferdinand roared, an intense look on his face.

“Jump down! Hurry!” his guard knights shouted alongside him.

I sprinted away from Raublut and leapt down from the stage just as he threw his magic tool, which arced through the air toward Lord Ferdinand and me. It must have been especially dangerous because the knights around us formed their highbeasts to escape, disregarding the risk that they might be shot down.

“Prince Anastasius!” cried one of my knights. He caught me with a band of light, then yanked me out of my fall and away from where the magic tool was about to land. It almost seemed to be moving in slow motion.

“Anti-explosion defensive formation!” came a shout.

I pulled my cape over my head—it was embroidered with defensive magic circles—then covered my ears, opened my mouth, and crouched as low as I could. An earth-shattering explosion shook the auditorium moments later. Despite our best attempts to retreat, we hadn’t made it very far; we were flung back so violently that we could no longer move.

As I groaned in agony, feeling on the verge of death, Rozemyne’s group rushed into the auditorium. I could no longer

hear properly, but I saw the door open and the light from the corridor shine through. We barely had time to react before a bafflingly large magic circle appeared and showered the entire room with healing light.

Rozemyne's arrival turned the tide of battle in our favor. Wounds from a magic tool powerful enough to have killed us all were healed in an instant, and she flatly declared that anyone who was omni-elemental would see the statues atop the altar move. The religious solemnity in the air vanished at once. No wonder Raublut moved to eliminate Rozemyne first.

"Crush them before they reunite! They are most vulnerable when they are apart!"

Rozemyne gave large-scale healing and granted us blessings even while under heavy fire. It brought to mind the ritual the adult Dunkelfelger knights had performed during a past Interduchy Tournament. Her prayers caused extravagant pillars of light to appear, enrapturing us all to the point that we forgot to fight.

That was, until a voice came from atop the altar.

"What in the world is happening here, Raublut?"

"Aaah, King Gervasio!"

A man had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, his countenance leaving not a shadow of a doubt that he was a member of extended royalty. Yurgenschmidt's archducal families sometimes bore children who looked regal—remnants of generations-old royal blood coursed through their veins—but it was uncanny to see those features on a foreign invader.

I suppose it isn't that strange—he was born and raised in Yurgenschmidt before leaving for Lanzenave—but still..

Part of me wished Gervasio looked more foreign. Anything to make others deem him unworthy to rule. Yet his appearance was unquestionably that of a Zent, and now he stood between the supreme gods.

"I beg of you," Raublut said, his arms outstretched, "reveal your gods-given Grutrissheit here for all to see! Show everyone you have become a true Zent!"

"Grutrissheit."

Gervasio answered the knight commander's plea and made the Grutrissheit appear in his hands. It was my first time witnessing such a feat, but it lined up with my father's and others' discussions of what a proper Zent could do. The knights fervently crying out

should have irritated me, but they seemed to be in a world of their own.

I swallowed hard. Rozemyne had said she could bestow the Grutrissheit upon others. That slim hope had spurred me to join the front line—to restore the royal family’s honor and worthiness to receive the holy book—but now it was gone. Before me stood a man who had obtained the Grutrissheit through his own power, directly from a goddess.

Have Ferdinand’s worries come true? Is a foreigner about to become the Zent?

Speaking honestly, I had never thought the Grutrissheit would end up in the hands of someone not only outside the royal family but outside Yurgenschmidt nobility in general. If a new Zent took the throne, what would happen to the current royals? The faces of Eglantine and our daughter flashed through my mind.

“Grutrissheit!”

Rozemyne’s voice tore through my despair. I turned to see her holding up a Grutrissheit of her own, though its shape wasn’t quite the same as Gervasio’s.

“No, look closely! Hers is too small to be genuine! King Gervasio has the real one!”

“What are you talking about?! *Lady Rozemyne’s* Grutrissheit is the real one! She opened country gates with it!”

Ignoring the clamor among the knights, Rozemyne began layering on blessings. Their light rained down on me as well. The battle wasn’t over; Gervasio had yet to steal the country’s foundation.

“Lady Rozemyne has received the blessings of countless gods,” one of her retainers announced. “As the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, she has been tasked with bestowing the Grutrissheit upon the next Zent. She will choose a worthy candidate from among the people of Yurgenschmidt. There is no need for an intruder from Lanzenave to take the throne.” His fanatic tone and expression sickened me, but his words were strangely inspiring.

“Rozemyne’s retainer is correct!” I declared. “We have no reason to let some foreign menace take the throne! Raublut! You betrayed my father, Yurgenschmidt, and everyone who put their faith in you as the Sovereign knight commander! I shall have your head!”

Spurred on by Rozemyne’s blessings, we raced to the shrine to

capture Raublut and the others. We defeated those closest to us with relative ease, but our dominance was short-lived; Gervasio also started praying for his allies.

The Grutrissheit makes it that easy to grant blessings?

Bitterness washed over me; the reality that true Zents acted with the gods' acceptance was being thrust into my face. Father spent decades supporting Yurgenschmidt, neglecting his body and soul in the process, and came not a single step closer to obtaining the Grutrissheit. This foreigner, on the other hand, had acquired it in a matter of days. One had to question what the gods truly cared about.

I gritted my teeth and continued taking down the Sovereign knights who opposed us. To protect the royal family's position, I needed to fight Raublut and Gervasio with all my might.

"Hear my— Mmph?!"

Gervasio's prayer was abruptly cut short. He must have been attacked. Raublut looked up at the altar and shouted, "Where did that come from?!"

I turned to my knights. "We need to get as close as we can while Raublut is distracted. Capture Gervasio, no matter the cost."

"Understood!"

As we focused on pushing through the enemies around us, Raublut shouted again. I instinctively looked up at the altar and saw Ferdinand attacking Gervasio with a weapon I didn't recognize.

Ferdinand must be trying to eliminate him. We share a common goal.

He couldn't have had a single good thing to say about the royals who had made him marry Detlinde and take on the crushing burden of supporting Ahrensbach... yet he still refused to side with Gervasio. He seemed to believe that there was no place in Yurgenschmidt for our foreign invaders. My only choice was to gamble on his support.

Leaving Gervasio to Ferdinand, I elected to focus on Raublut. Before I even made it up the first step of the stage, however, lightning began to strike across the auditorium. I reflexively moved my cape to protect my head, but the bolts fell only on our enemies. It must have been an attack of some kind, as the charms our foes were wearing launched counters at the magic circle in the air.

"Is that the Grutrissheit's power?"

"Most likely."

Relieved that the fresh assault was on our side, I raced up onto the stage. Raublut was sprinting toward the altar, directing his troops to block the lightning with their silver cloth, when—

“What?!”

Out of nowhere, the knight commander was thrown back. I thought the gods had deemed him unworthy and refused to let him near the altar, but that couldn’t have been true, could it? Surely I was overthinking. Should the same thing not have happened to Ferdinand, who was still fighting Gervasio?

There must be something that distinguishes them.

I raced up the stage with my knights, keeping one eye on the altar as we closed in on Raublut. But before we could reach him, Rozemyne cried out, and the auditorium flooded with water too fierce to resist. The torrential downpour had come out of nowhere, and all of us—Raublut included—were helplessly swept away.

Uh...

By the time I realized this was no normal waschen, the water was already swirling around the room. We weren’t the only ones caught in the sudden whirlpool; Rozemyne and her retainers were being dragged around with us.

It made no sense; the deluge had targeted everyone, friend or foe. I couldn’t see. It felt awful. And even though this was a waschen, it didn’t end quickly.

What’s going on?! Rozemyne, what in the world have you done?!

Amid the panic, I could only hold my nose and entrust my body to the current. Then the water vanished just as suddenly as it had appeared. I gazed around and realized that I was in the audience seats; I must have been thrown pretty far. I wasn’t hurt—I was clad in armor, and the seating was high up enough to have broken my fall—but some others were dropped all the way from the ceiling.

“At least warn us before you act!” I snapped, leaping to my feet and angrily searching for Rozemyne. I’d yet to spot her when the door flew open once again, and the blue-capes of Dunkelfelger flooded into the auditorium.

“Support Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne!”

“Raublut, you dared to poison King Trauerqual despite serving as his knight commander. For that, you will not be spared my wrath. As his wife, I will strike you down in his stead.”

Aub Dunkelfelger and Lady Magdalena led the charge. They must have finished suppressing the rebellion at the royal palace.

Their presence meant the palace was safe, which meant Eglantine and the others were safe too.

Lady Magdalena intends to get Raublut, so I'll capture the other rebels.

Again, I turned my attention to the altar. Rozemyne had at some point formed a shield of Wind, and Ferdinand swung a rainbow-colored sword. Gervasio, meanwhile, was hiding behind a geteilt, his flank wide open. It was the perfect chance to strike.

I readied my weapon, mounted my highbeast, and shot toward the trio—but I was too late. Ferdinand unleashed an attack, the statues of the gods flashed, and then everyone atop the altar disappeared.

“What?!”

I continued my ascent, trying to glean some more information, but collided with the same invisible barrier that had stopped Raublut. The shock rendered me speechless. I simply stared up at the altar in disbelief.

Rozemyne and Ferdinand passed through so easily, but I...

A cold sweat ran down my back. An impassable chasm separated the chosen from the excluded, and my status as a royal seemed to slip through my fingers.

Magdalena — Smiting the Traitor

The discovery of several intruders at the Royal Academy had prompted Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, to send a fresh set of orders by ordonnanz. He advised that the palace be sealed and that nobody be allowed to approach the Academy—and the Zent made it so.

The palace had already been sealed once before, so everyone acted quickly and efficiently. Movement between it and the Royal Academy ceased, and duchies lost the privilege of contacting the palace directly. Henceforth, all communication would first be filtered through the villas.

“Ralfrieda, send word to the scholars and attendants in the palace,” King Trauerqual instructed. “Clementia, direct the knights. Magdalena, contact the villas. Be sure to warn Sigiswald to strengthen his guard; his villa is nearest to Ahrensbach.”

“Understood.”

As the Zent’s wives, we moved at once in response to his orders.

Lady Ralfrieda would contact the palace as the first wife, while Lady Clementia would oversee the knights as the second. My duty as the third wife was to send word to the various villas. I would tell them of the intruders discovered at the Royal Academy, that the palace had once again been sealed, that they should remain vigilant, and that Lady Clementia was going to direct the knights.

“King Trauerqual,” Lady Clementia said, taking a somewhat feeble tone, “once the knights have gathered, I shall take them with me to my villa. As the knights returning to the palace from the Royal Academy will need to pass through my villa, its teleportation door cannot be sealed. May I station more guards there?”

She gazed at King Trauerqual with aqua-blue eyes. In the aftermath of the civil war, when many had refused to accept him as the Zent, her villa had come under attack. Her daughter had died in the violence, and she had come to fear brutish men who spoke and acted roughly. It stood to reason that she was so concerned; her villa had the fewest male knights of them all and rarely saw much traffic. The returning knights would not have access to her living area, but that was hardly a comfort.

Lady Clementia’s delicate light-green hair was loosely tied, and she looked as frail as she sounded. I was told she had never once held a weapon outside her Royal Academy classes. As a woman of Dunkelfelger, I thought she should learn to protect herself—not that I could actually say such a thing.

“You may,” King Trauerqual replied. “I shall send two of my guard knights with you. Entrust the management of your villa to them.”

“I thank you.”

I couldn’t help but furrow my brow. It made sense to send experienced knights to Lady Clementia’s villa, which would serve as an important supply line going forward, but two of the Zent’s own guard knights? King Trauerqual would be far too vulnerable.

Perhaps I could move knights from my villa to the palace.

After watching Lady Clementia leave with two of the Zent’s guards, I considered which of his knights remained and the security of my villa. Aside from requesting more knights, there was plenty one could do to bolster one’s defenses. Laying traps and relocating one’s bedroom were among the more obvious examples. Moreover, unlike Lady Clementia, I could depend on my own martial might. If our king was lacking knights, then perhaps I would guard him

myself.

Lady Ralfrieda sighed. “To think Ehrenfest’s warning was correct...” She shook her head a few times, causing her golden tresses to sway.

The palace had previously been sealed in response to a message from Prince Sigiswald, who had met with Aub Ehrenfest in the king’s stead and relayed the archduke’s warning that an invasion was coming. The Sovereign Order had spent three days at the Royal Academy awaiting an attack, but they had seen neither hide nor hair of any intruders. The Sovereign temple had sent three distinct requests for the Royal Academy to be reopened for their ceremonies, and when consulted through the villas, Ehrenfest had said nothing in response.

The absence of a threat had made it hard to justify keeping the royal palace sealed, so King Trauerqual sent Raublut and Prince Anastasius to search the Royal Academy. They had reported nothing of note, so the decision was made to reopen the palace.

And that was when our invaders had struck. Their timing seemed more than a mere coincidence.

“I wonder,” Lady Ralfrieda continued, “where were these intruders hiding that they were not discovered during the search?” Her blue eyes turned to me. “Do you have any ideas, Lady Magdalena?”

I thought back to the report Raublut and Prince Anastasius had given and went through the buildings on the Academy’s grounds. “As I understand it, they searched everywhere with connections to Ahrensbach—their dormitory, their tea party room, and even Old Werkestock’s dormitory. The dorms and tea party rooms of the other abolished duchies were searched as well. There are other villas dotting the grounds, but they were sealed at the hands of past Zents and cannot be reopened without the Grutrissheit. Though nowhere else comes to mind, the facts speak for themselves—there are hostiles lurking *somewhere* in the Academy.”

“What in the world are Raublut and the others doing?” Lady Ralfrieda seethed. “How have these intruders not been captured when we have guards stationed all over?” She had put Raublut forward for the position of knight commander, so incidents like this made her more frustrated than most. Still, as we had merely taken shelter in our villas, we could not criticize their lack of results.

“Our foes must be convinced we will not find them; they would

not have had the arrogance to invade the Royal Academy otherwise. Perhaps it was because Raublut and the others were on high alert that they were discovered at all. In any case, now that we know about them, we are in a state of war. We will need to ready ourselves and plan ahead.”

“Goodness. But once the royal palace is sealed, the villas will serve as the only way inside. Should we not move our focus from the palace to those entrances?”

My chest tightened, and a strange sense of unease began to take root. I could not ascertain the reason. It was like we were missing something crucial, or the information we had access to was being manipulated, or some grand scheme was proceeding beyond our reach...

“Indeed,” I said. “The villas will need to be guarded, but only as a means to an end. The Zent is our main focus, so we should assign him more knights than anywhere else. I will check on my villa and then return to the palace to protect him.”

“You, Lady Magdalena?! Once the palace is sealed, our foes will not be able to access it from the Royal Academy. I see no reason for us to worry ourselves.”

“If our foes are from Ahrensbach and Lanzenave, then Prince Sigiswald’s villa in the southeast will need the most guards. Mine is in the southwest and should require only the bare minimum. As our most important location, the royal palace should receive more troops, not fewer. Know that nothing is ever certain. If the knight commander has his eyes on the Academy, then we must keep ours on the Zent.”

And if others intended to leave the Zent underprotected, I would join his guard to ensure his safety.

“Magdalena, there is no need to go to such lengths for me,” King Trauerqual said, clearly troubled.

I smiled gently and shook my head. Even as a little girl, I’d understood that Dunkelfelger was the Zent’s sword. My heart was set on defeating the foes of our divinely mandated king and protecting the peace in Yurgenschmidt. I needed to make good on my duchy’s oath—if not now, then when?

“I am a woman of Dunkelfelger,” I said. “As the knight commander has his hands full at the Royal Academy, I wish to carry out my duty as your sword. Is it really that unusual for a wife to worry about her husband? For my own peace of mind, please allow

my guard knights to protect you as well.”

King Trauerqual sighed, exasperated, but gave me a kind smile nonetheless. “As long as it remains within the living quarters... do as you please.”

I temporarily returned to my villa; rearranged the knights stationed there; instructed them on how to contact me, rest, and respond to various emergencies; and then went back to the royal palace with my knights.

Our first course of action was to quickly comb the Zent’s living quarters. It was well protected—isolated through the use of mana and accessible only to those with the correct authority—but that was no excuse for the poor security I witnessed upon my arrival. The guard was so lax that it actually made my head spin.

I addressed those with me: “King Trauerqual will be most vulnerable when he is asleep. Let us begin by revising the security here, if nowhere else. First, we shall add my knights to the night watch. Then we must lay detection traps; nobody should enter or leave his quarters except those guarding it. I would also advise you to move the king’s bed to that side room. Our aim is to deceive the enemy.”

“Should you not sleep alongside the Zent to further secure his person?” one of the guards asked me.

“Though I would not mind that, my being there would make King Trauerqual too anxious to sleep.”

Indeed, it was hard to believe he would get much rest with a fully armored woman beside him, ready to fight at a moment’s notice. Some smiled at me and said that I was being too cautious, but I disagreed. I took a brisk nap and prepared to act in the dead of night if necessary.

I would contact my elder brother as well, but King Trauerqual is not yet facing any immediate danger.

My brother, Aub Dunkelfelger, also served as the Zent’s sword. He would come without fail if the king was in danger. Ehrenfest had already spoken with him, and I had said that I would request his aid if anything happened, so he must have been ready to join us.

I spent the night on guard, but we encountered not a single hostile. Raublut sent no word of the invaders having been captured, so the scholars debated over whether to unseal the palace or keep

waiting. They had not reached a conclusion by the time night fell again.

“Nothing happened last night,” King Trauerqual reminded me. “Must you continue to push yourself?”

“My love, our enemies will act precisely when we lower our guard. We saw as much when we last unsealed the palace, did we not? Last night might have been uneventful, but that does not mean tonight will be the same.”

King Trauerqual seemed melancholic as he watched me rearm traps and restation the night watch, still partially armored. “I worry about your health. Is it also Dunkelfelger’s way to remain so guarded at night that no one can get any rest?”

“Indeed, for we are in a state of war. Pay no mind to me, dear, and get some sleep in the side room. We hope to catch our foes off guard, remember, so you must not tell anyone but the knights here now where our traps are set or where you are staying.”

Despite the king’s concerns, such precautions were entirely necessary. Returning to my villa would only add to my stresses; I would feel so restless about his inadequate guard that I would not be able to sleep.

“Fine, fine,” King Trauerqual replied with a shrug. “If you insist.” He must have realized that I would not relent because he relocated to the side room.

As I watched the Zent leave, I reaffirmed my resolve to protect him no matter the cost. Then I turned to the night watch and said, “Perhaps I should join you all tonight.”

“If you stand guard, Lady Magdalena, the enemy will notice the change,” one of the knights retorted, chastising me slightly. “Please stay in bed, even if you do not sleep.”

I went into the Zent’s usual chambers to lie down, but I was only half asleep. My knights had refused to leave the bed-curtain open even when I expressed my desire to listen to what was happening outside and what was being said.

Even as I rested, I was ready for battle. My hair was braided so that I could quickly wrap it up and secure it with a single band, and my clothes were suitable to be worn outside. On my belt were offensive magic tools and a feystone that would grant me full plate armor.

I closed my eyes. Much like King Trauerqual and the others, I did not expect there to be an attack tonight. Any incidents of note

would occur at the Royal Academy, and there was no risk of our foes slipping into the palace. Still, I remained on guard; it was better to be safe than sorry.

This is why Dunkelfelger women rarely ever fit in or adapt when they marry into other duchies.

My thoughts became hazy as the darkness lulled me to sleep... but then I noticed the whistle of something cutting through the air. My eyes shot open, and a moment later, a man let out a surprised cry that reverberated through the hall.

“An intruder!” I shouted to my knights as I sat bolt upright and started searching my belt. “Do not let them escape!”

I touched the feystone that would create my armor, channeled mana into it, and then leapt out of bed before the armor had even fully formed. By the time I reached the hall, my schtappe in hand, the night watch had already caught the intruder.

“I’m not an enemy!” the man shouted. “I’m one of King Trauerqual’s guard knights!”

If nothing else, the apparent intruder was wearing the standard dress of a Sovereign knight. The night watch attendant lit the area to reveal the man’s face.

“Though you may be one of the Zent’s guards,” I said, “you were not assigned to tonight’s watch.”

“Lady Magdalena?! Why are you here?!” the captured knight exclaimed, shocked that I had just come out of the Zent’s bedchamber. He probably served under Lady Clementia in her villa or Raublut at the Royal Academy.

“There must have been a miscommunication among the chain of command,” he continued. “I—”

“Suspect individuals must be disarmed and imprisoned,” I said. “You might be using a disguising magic tool.”

“Lady Magdalena, this man is exactly who he claims to be,” one of the king’s guards interjected. “I can guarantee it.” He and the others on night watch were against us disarming the intruder.

How naive could these knights be? Our captive had attempted to trespass into a high-security area; under no circumstances could we let him go. That we were simply disarming him and not breaking his bones to render him immobile was enough of a kindness.

“We can listen to his excuses later,” I said. “Consider this treatment a punishment for his neglect. He should have known that

only those assigned to the night watch are allowed to be here.”

Paying no mind to the man’s associates trying to smooth things over, I sent an ordonnanz to the knights guarding the teleportation doors to the villas: “This is Magdalena. We have an intruder in the Zent’s living quarters! The enemy might be disguising themselves as Sovereign knights. Be on your guard!”

As my bird departed, more arrived with urgent messages.

“Intruders spotted running to the villas’ teleportation doors! Requesting aid!”

“There are knights running to the scholar building! Be on your guard!”

The guards who had just moments ago been defending the intruder now looked at him with hard eyes. I considered it unlikely they would free him against my orders and rushed into the side room where the Zent was staying. The fuss outside had awoken him.

“King Trauerqual, the enemy have disguised themselves as Sovereign knights and infiltrated the palace. I request your permission to summon Dunkelfelger, the Zent’s sword.”

Though he stayed in bed, the king nodded and said, “Please do.”

“Issheit, this is Magdalena. We caught an intruder trying to enter the Zent’s living quarters in the royal palace. Inform my brother, Aub Dunkelfelger, and tell him we require his aid.”

First, I sent an ordonnanz to the guard knight I had entrusted with defending my villa.

“The royal palace has been sealed,” I continued. “Send a letter to the aub and one to the knight guarding the Dunkelfelger Dormitory’s teleportation circle. Correspondence sent from the palace might be interfered with. Any knights with access to Rauffen, the dormitory supervisor, should contact him by ordonnanz. Ask him to send word to Dunkelfelger as well. Ensure that all responses go through you and then report back to me.”

We would contact my brother through as many avenues as we could. As I continued to send more ordonnanzes, my knights sent some of their own.

“Intruders have infiltrated the royal palace. Mobilize everyone in the knight dormitory!”

“Aid those chasing the intruders!”

“Ralfrieda, this is Trauerqual,” the king said. “The palace has

been breached. Magdalena is leading the defense and has called upon Dunkelfelger for aid. Contact the princes at once. Tell them to seal their villas and prioritize their safety.”

My eyes widened. I was in charge of protecting the Zent’s living quarters, but this was the first I was hearing about leading the defense as a whole.

“You are putting me in charge of the defense?” I asked.

“Yes. As the knight commander is absent, I trust you to lead the knights in his stead. You will apprehend our foes no matter what form they take.”

I knelt and said, “As you wish.” Then, as I stood up again, one of my attendants approached with a pouch containing offensive magic tools, rejuvenation potions, and the like. I expected no less of an attendant of the sword. I gave her a grateful smile, noting that she was equipped for battle as well, then accepted the pouch and hooked it onto my belt.

It was then that yet another ordonnanz arrived.

“Lady Magdalena, this is Issheit. We received a response from Lady Sieglinde of Dunkelfelger. She informed us that Aub Dunkelfelger is already fighting at the Royal Academy and that she is stationed in her dormitory to provide rear support. She will direct the aub to head to the royal palace at once. Please unseal the entrance.”

Shocked though I was by the speed of the response, I was more taken aback by its contents. Who was Dunkelfelger fighting at the Royal Academy, and why had we not been informed of their presence? My thoughts turned to the man who had asked us to seal the palace to begin with—who had been at the Royal Academy ever since Ehrenfest sounded the alarm bell.

Raublut!

As the face of our true foe arose in my mind, I could not suppress a grimace. I turned to King Trauerqual and voiced my conclusion.

“Magdalena! How can you say such a thing?!” he exclaimed in response. Few lords would accept that their most trusted knight and the head of their Order had betrayed them.

As much as it pained me to see the king so stunned, it also reminded me to close my heart and not to err. “If the Sovereign knights were fighting *with* Dunkelfelger, do you not think they would have told us through the villas? That we were kept in the

dark leads me to believe the two groups are fighting one another. Do you recall who told us to seal the royal palace in the first place, stopping us from communicating with the duchies? Very few people could sneak an intruder into your living quarters.”

King Trauerqual paled, at a loss for words. There was no reason to drive him into a corner. My enemy was at the Royal Academy.

“Dunkelfelger is the Zent’s sword,” I said. “We smite those who oppose the divine mandate and protect the peace here in Yurgenschmidt. As promised, I shall protect you no matter who your foes may be. I shall see them slaughtered. I ask only that you unseal the palace so Dunkelfelger’s knights can enter.”

The Zent got up and went to do just that. I exited the room and sent out more ordonnances.

“This is Magdalena. By the decree of Zent Trauerqual, I am leading the defense. The palace shall once again be unsealed. Let the knights of Dunkelfelger through when they arrive.”

“This is Magdalena. The enemy was not disguised after all—a portion of the Sovereign Knight’s Order has started a rebellion! Our foes are Raublut and those who follow him!”

“Lady Ralfrieda, this is Magdalena. *Raublut* arranged the attack on the palace! The knights of our Order are fighting among themselves. Please spread the word to each of the villas.”

Some of the night watch stared at me in shock.

“Mere slander!” one of the knights exclaimed. “The knight commander would never betray the king. Are you trying to divide us?! Take it back! King Trauerqual, Lady Magdalena must be stopped!”

“Silence!” I snapped, then turned to my knights. “Protecting the Zent is our highest priority. As we have good reason to believe Raublut is a traitor, we should not trust any of the king’s guards. Detain them all.”

I joined my knights in restraining the others. Our targets resisted and requested the aid of their fellow guards, turning the Zent’s living quarters into a battleground.

“Protect the Zent! We must stop Lady Magdalena from doing as she pleases!”

“We know not who is working for Raublut, so none must be allowed near the king!”

King Trauerqual was likely still coming to terms with Raublut’s betrayal. He could not join his guard knights in stopping me, nor

could he join me and order his knights to comply. He simply closed his eyes, wrought with pain, and dropped into a chair.

My attendant and I fought back anyone who tried to approach King Trauerqual while my knights steadily detained his guards. Two ordonnanzes arrived amid the chaos.

“Zent Trauerqual, this is Aub Dunkelfelger. I have arrived at the palace and request your authority to start capturing Sovereign knights.”

“Magdalena, it’s Werdekraf. Where are you right now?”

I could see that King Trauerqual was still torn over how to respond. Keeping him in the corner of my eye, I responded for him.

“Brother, this is Magdalena. I am with King Trauerqual. There is fighting in the Zent’s living quarters. I grant Dunkelfelger permission to capture Sovereign knights.”

I noticed the tension leave the king’s shoulders—he was relieved to have escaped making such a grave decision—but only for a moment. Then he frowned as if to chastise me for answering without his authorization.

“Relax, dear. You have entrusted me with command over this battle. It would not be wise to put this burden on the Sovereign knights; they would not find it easy to fight their former allies, and we would struggle to tell friend from foe. This battle will go much quicker if we have Dunkelfelger’s knights subjugate our enemies for us. Furthermore... our true foe is not in the palace but at the Royal Academy.”

We would not be able to release any of our prisoners until their leader, Raublut, was dealt with. King Trauerqual clutched his chest and heaved a pained sigh.

Another ordonnanz darted into the room. I expected a report from Dunkelfelger or the knights in the palace, but I was taken completely by surprise.

“Zent Trauerqual, this is Ferdinand of Ehrenfest.”

The bird went on to make some truly shocking announcements. Together with my brother, Ehrenfest had fought the rebels from Lanzenave and Ahrensbach hiding in the Adalgisa villa. They had taken prisoners, but Lanzenave’s King Gervasio was not among them. He was apparently working to obtain the Grutrissheit, and Raublut was positioned in the auditorium to protect him.

That much has been going on at the Royal Academy...?

There was so much new intelligence that I was at a loss for

words. The same went for King Trauerqual; he sat motionless upon hearing that Raublut really had betrayed him and that a foreigner was about to obtain the Grutrissheit he had spent over a decade searching for.

To conclude his message, Lord Ferdinand requested that King Trauerqual march to the front line and command the knights as their Zent.

“King Trauerqual,” I said, “tell Lord Ferdinand that Dunkelfelger is here to fight in your stead and—”

Before I could finish, King Trauerqual swung his schtappe with a slightly trembling hand. The yellow feystone he was holding turned into a bird, which then departed with a very clear message: he wanted a *true* Zent to take the throne.

“No!” I cried, overcome with desperation. “They will think you have abandoned your duties and authority as the Zent! Correct that at once!”

“Still without the Grutrissheit, I am the Zent in name only...” he said with an unchanging expression, repeating his words to the ordonnanz. “The last embers of our country will die without a true Zent to save them. I pray only that one will arise.”

Two of his five bound guard knights echoed the sentiment, shouting that Yurgenschmidt needed a true Zent and for King Trauerqual to be set free from his burdens.

“King Trauerqual, what are you saying?! You *are* the Zent! The nobles of Yurgenschmidt acknowledge you as such! That is precisely why Lord Ferdinand sent his ordonnanz to you!”

He shook his head and repeated: “Still without the Grutrissheit, I am the Zent in name only. The last embers of our country will die without a true Zent to save them. I pray only that one will arise.”

I suddenly noticed an unusual aroma coming from King Trauerqual. It was sweet like a perfume one might put in one’s hair, but he had never been particularly fond of sweet scents. I sensed danger, somehow.

“Are you wearing some manner of perfume?” I asked. “Or were you perhaps approached by someone with a preference for sweet smells?”

“I recently started sleeping to a calming incense. Perhaps the smell clings to me.”

He had responded normally that time, unlike his droning repetition mere moments ago. I drew my brows together in a frown.

Something was amiss, but I could not put my finger on what.

“Lady Magdalena, is this not exactly how the knights under the influence of trug behaved?” one of the bound guards asked. “They appeared normal on the surface but would not respond properly to certain subjects. And they exuded a sweet scent...”

I recalled that strange incident and the plant theorized to have caused it, then inhaled sharply. “Was it perhaps Raublut who brought trug to the Sovereign Knight’s Order?”

Raublut had investigated the trug-driven knights; assuming he was the culprit, it must have been easy for him to give false reports. How much intelligence had he twisted or outright hidden from us? How would the country’s nobles look upon King Trauerqual, who had thus far been acting on false information?

I will make Raublut pay!

First, I released the guards who had not echoed the king’s strange remarks. “It seems clear to me that you three are not under the influence of trug. I return your freedom so you may defend King Trauerqual and his living quarters. I will unite with my brother and smite Raublut.”

“Understood!”

I told one of my knights and an attendant of the sword to stay behind, then led the rest in a charge from the Zent’s living quarters to the teleportation door to the Royal Academy.

“Brother, this is Magdalena. The Zent’s living quarters have been secured. I am now heading to the Royal Academy.”

Leaving the safe-seeming knights to defend the royal palace, I rendezvoused with my brother. Together we sprinted toward the Royal Academy’s auditorium.

“Magdalena, use this,” my brother said, handing me a silver dagger. It was much heavier than any schtappe-made weapon. Depending on how one wielded it, the weight could prove detrimental in combat.

“We retrieved it from one of the Lanzenavians,” he explained. “The silver cloth they wear blocks all mana attacks, and no schtappe weaponry works against it. Conversely, this silver dagger can easily shred through feystone armor. Defeating foes of an entirely different culture is no easy feat.”

I gracefully accepted the dagger and attached it to my belt as we ran, allowing my body to adjust to the weight and find my new center of gravity. It was not long before we reached our destination.

"This is the auditorium," I said. "Is everyone ready?"

"Absolutely! Open the doors! *Charge!*" my brother roared. His knights leapt upon the doors and threw them open, and we both rushed into the auditorium.

Though a battle had clearly been fought, nobody was in formation; a major spell of some sort had scattered everyone, friend or foe, and stalled the fighting in the process. Our entry was met only with looks of shock, allowing me to immediately spot Raublut.

"*Lanze!*" I declared, turning my schtappe into a spear and closing in on my target. "Raublut, you dared to poison King Trauerqual despite serving as his knight commander. For that, you will not be spared my wrath. As his wife, I will strike you down in his stead."

My brother responded to Lord Ferdinand atop the altar and instructed his knights to capture the traitors among the Sovereign Order. Some of our foes were standing in a protective circle around Raublut, but they dispersed somewhat when they saw our force, making it easier for me to forge a path.

Before I could reach Raublut, however, something strange happened. The statues of the gods gave rise to columns of light. Then there was a flash, and the three people atop the altar disappeared.

"King Gervasio?!" Raublut cried, looking completely taken aback as he rushed to investigate. He was wearing not the black cape of a Sovereign knight but a silver cape brought from Lanzenave—yet another sign that he did not see King Trauerqual as his true lord.

I thought back to the king shaken with disbelief at Raublut's betrayal. I could still see his trembling hands as, under the influence of trug, he claimed not to be a true Zent.

I must not act according to emotion. Raublut's strength far surpasses my own.

Traitor or not, Raublut was the commander of the Sovereign Knight's Order; his combat prowess and experience were not to be underestimated. I sealed away the bitterness his superiority inspired, then looked around in search of my brother.

Where is he...?

It took me only a brief moment to meet his gaze. He was directing his knights with a silver sword in hand, all while approaching Raublut from another angle. I realized then that his

red eyes had been watching me the entire time—and that I neglected to pay attention to my allies.

Once this is all over, I expect to be scolded for my inexperience.

Recalling my brother's attitude when we used to train together at home, I refocused and gripped my spear. Raublut was climbing the stairs to the whirling stage. He would prove troublesome for us if he reached the top... but until then, his footing would be poor and his back exposed.

I saw my brother give a curt nod, so I squeezed my spear and charged at Raublut from behind.

"Hmph!"

"Hrm?!"

Raublut turned and dodged my strike, creating the very opening my brother was waiting for. He leapt in from the side and swung his silver blade. Raublut let out a grunt and managed to dodge again but lost his poise in the process. I tossed an offensive magic tool at him before he could ready his weapon.

"Gah...!"

Raublut spread out his silver cape just in time to block the tool entirely. My brother had spoken true when he told me Lanzenave's silver cloth was immune to mana. The knight commander saw my spear and the silver sword in my brother's hand, appeared to weigh up his options, and then focused on defending against the latter; he must have concluded that my spear was easier to deal with because he locked swords with my brother while using his cape to block my thrusts.

Not yet. Wait for an opening.

I tried to attack the parts of the knight commander's flank not hidden by his silver cape, but even then, there was little I could do against his full plate armor. As I continued to strike, I noticed his focus shift more and more to my brother.

"Aub Dunkelfelger," Raublut said, "you must understand that Yurgenschmidt needs a true Zent with the Grutrissheit. And you, Lady Magdalena—you have supported Trauerqual through his countless struggles. Is it not time to relieve him of his terrible burden?"

I took no interest in the words of a traitor. He had betrayed his lord, and that was reason enough to smite him. I could indulge my curiosity about his background and motives once he was locked up.

"Hmph!"

There was a sharp metallic wail as Raublut's and my brother's blades clashed again. It focused my senses as I squeezed the grip of my silver dagger. The tips of their crossed swords each snaked down toward the opposing man's hilt, taking barely an instant—but to me, it seemed to move in slow motion.

Now!

They had moved to ready their swords again, creating the opportunity I was so intently waiting for.

I stabbed my silver dagger into Raublut's side. Its glinting blade slid through his feystone armor without any resistance, almost as if he had not been wearing any. The sensation was the same as cutting straight into an opponent's body.

"What?!" Raublut exclaimed. His eyes wide as saucers, he gazed down at the dagger in his side. "How...? When did you get that...?"

The knight commander was wide open. My brother thrust his sword through the man's shoulder as deep as it would go, then drew it back and swiped it through the air, shaking the blood from its blade as Raublut crumpled before him.



“I confirmed with my own eyes that Lady Rozemyne wields the Gruttrissheit,” my brother said. “As the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, she intends to bestow it upon a person of her choosing. I take no interest in a foreign Zent candidate.”

Raublut could fight no longer. The knights who had watched our battle rushed over and started disarming him. He would need to endure many long interrogations in the coming days, so he would likely be given a rejuvenation potion to keep him alive.

“It’s over...” I said with a relieved sigh.

As I enjoyed the satisfaction of having crushed my husband’s foes—of having carried out my duty as the Zent’s sword—second bell rang. My brother and I tapped our fists together with victory in our hearts. We could now redirect our focus from the battle to our surroundings.

“Is that all the prisoners?” my brother asked. “Free and assist Prince Anastasius and his guard knights. Heissshitze, report what happened while we were operating separately.”

I watched my brother go, then climbed the stairs past where Raublut had fallen and gazed upon the auditorium. Dunkelfelger’s knights had detained every one of our Sovereign adversaries. Prince Anastasius was watching from the audience stands. The group wearing Ehrenfest capes was causing some sort of commotion by the door.

“Such overwhelming divinity colored my lady’s embrace!” came a cry from their ranks. “A goddess has descended into her!”

Curious, I enhanced my senses to observe them. They were all retainers serving Lady Rozemyne; I recognized them from ceremonies and my time spent translating in the underground archive.

“Her mana certainly has changed,” another said. “I don’t know about a goddess descending into her, though...”

“Can you not feel the supernatural power that now envelops us? Is its intoxicating, all-consuming beauty beyond your comprehension?”

“The only thing *beyond my comprehension* is how you drew such an outlandish conclusion.”

Hartmut appeared to be the only one causing a stir. The others with him were simply exasperated.

“Hartmut...” Leonore said, sighing when she noticed my eyes on them. She bound him with light, then set him down in a corner of the auditorium. “You have drawn everyone’s attention and distracted them from their work. You are not only embarrassing us but being a bother as well. Reflect on your actions in silence.”

Her words and deeds were merciless but proper for a knight on the battlefield. I was impressed. Rarely did women of other duchies have it in them to make such cold, calculated decisions.

Still... what was that about a goddess descending?

Their discussion reminded me of that unusual sight not too long ago. My focus on Raublut had pushed it from my mind, but Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne, and Gervasio had vanished in the statues’ light. It seemed that nobody had heard from them since.

Where in the world did those three go?

I was suddenly reminded of one of the Royal Academy’s twenty mysteries. According to Hildebrand, a student who played pranks on altars and shrines had abruptly vanished in a burst of light from the statues of the supreme gods and was never seen again.

Thinking about it now, the story might have been founded in the process for obtaining the Grutrissheit. Upon learning it from the underground archive, Lady Rozemyne had circled the shrines before disappearing much like the character in the story. By the time she had returned, she had grown so much that she was unrecognizable. Atop the shrine, she had appeared to be an adult.

My brother had said that Lady Rozemyne was the divine avatar of a goddess—one who would return the Grutrissheit to Yurgenschmidt. In that case, it seemed reasonable to assume that Lord Ferdinand and Gervasio had also acquired the holy book.

If they return, would any of them bestow the Grutrissheit upon King Trauerqual...?

I thought about each of their relationships with the Zent, then the ordonnanzes he had exchanged with Lord Ferdinand. I could not help but grimace. There was no one better suited to the role of the Zent than King Trauerqual, who had won the civil war and ruled the country for over a decade despite the great pains it had caused him and the strong opposition of the Sovereign temple.

O supreme gods, if others are being granted the Grutrissheit, I ask that King Trauerqual receive one as well. May his years of suffering be justly rewarded.

I prayed atop the whirling stage, but neither it nor the statues

shone.

Gervasio — Descent of a Goddess

“Terza, do not resist,” spoke Erwaermen. “Accept it all. Fill your vessel and allow not a single drop to spill. Become one with Mestionora’s wisdom.”

Despite my attempts to explain that my name was Gervasio, not Terza, Erwaermen continued to address me as he pleased. It seemed the gods understood only the name under which one was initially registered. Hearing it was somewhat unpleasant and reminded me of my time in the villa, but I did not care; my only concern was receiving the Book of Mestionora despite having moved to Lanzenave.

Erwaermen’s voice filled me with bliss, as did the stream of knowledge raining down on me as light. I could not contain my satisfaction about having obtained the Grutrissheit; with it, I could finally become the Zent. I had been raised a branch royal in Yurgenschmidt only to be sent away to Lanzenave upon coming of age and made to support the entire country alone as the sole owner of a schtappe. But now... I would overturn that cursed fate.

My cheer was immeasurable, but it lasted only a moment. Such a vast wealth of knowledge was hard to absorb. Matters that piqued my interest came continuously to mind, and pausing to focus on them cost me the information that followed. Casting aside all resistance was easier said than done, and Erwaermen chastised me with each mistake.

“Hmm...?”

Out of nowhere, the light of wisdom had vanished. I could not tell how much time had passed, but I could sense that its disappearance was premature. I opened my eyes, confused.

“Was that all...?” I asked.

“No, it was not.” Erwaermen stared quizzically up at the sky. “I wonder, what is going on?”

As I suspected, the process was not complete. Erwaermen muttered that the gods were still connected. I cautiously looked up as well, unsure what was happening—and the light returned.

“What?!” I cried.

“Hmm. So it *had* yet to finish. Accept the knowledge. Do not resist.”

So he said, but the light soon vanished again. I could not even begin to fathom the reason. Erwaermen looked up at the sky a second time, then muttered that the process had indeed concluded.

“Terza, confirm that you have obtained the Book of Mestionora.”

“At once. *Grutrisheit*.”

It appeared in my hands. I trembled with emotion as I opened the cover... and then blanched with horror. The text was full of gaps, and the pages near the end were completely blank, indicating an unmistakable failure to absorb all the knowledge.

“The interruption must be to blame,” Erwaermen said. “This is my first time encountering such an occurrence. I can say only that your Book of Mestionora is incomplete, which makes you insufficient as a Zent candidate.”

My breath caught in my throat, and my fingers dug into my Book of Mestionora. This strange turn of events had never even crossed my mind. If the gods abandoned me now, my work would all have been for nothing.

“Is there a way to compensate for the wisdom I lost?” I asked, eyeing Erwaermen carefully.

“As I recall, I was once told that Zents of the past supplemented their incomplete Books with knowledge from a certain archive. If you can find it, you might be able to make up for your failings.”

He was likely referring to the archive beneath the Royal Academy’s library. I recalled the door that had denied me entry, and a wave of bitterness washed over me. If not that archive, it was bound to be another somewhere in the royal palace that only the Zent could enter.

I would not be able to move forward without becoming the Zent.

That girl... I wonder whether her Book of Mestionora is complete.

She was that archduke candidate who circled the shrines before me, failed to enter the underground archive, and then disappeared from the upstairs of the reading room. She was said to be capable of performing ceremonies with true divine instruments, and the Sovereign temple had requested possession of her in exchange for their cooperation.

Rozemyne—that was the name Raublut had given for her. She had doubtless visited this place before me. If word spread that she was the gods’ favorite to become the next Zent, no strings Raublut

could pull would change that outcome.

“How are there three Zent candidates, yet none of you have a complete Book of Mestionora?” Erwaermen complained. “Good grief, this generation...”

Judging by his remark, Rozemyne’s Book of Mestionora was also flawed in some way. I should have been relieved, but my focus was drawn to the third apparent Zent candidate. Raublut had mentioned nothing of the sort. Detlinde proclaimed to be one, but she was lacking mana, elements, and intelligence; there existed no world in which she had made it here.

“Erwaermen, might I ask about the other Zent candidates?”

“They are Myne and Quinta.”

To my shock, neither name belonged to the archduke candidate Raublut had told me about. Perhaps Myne was Rozemyne; the latter name did contain the former, and the fact she had two in the first place told me she was no ordinary noble. There were bound to be secrets surrounding the circumstances of her birth.

“Quinta,” however, I immediately recognized—it was one of the names used to number young seeds destined to become feystones. Only upon leaving the Adalgisa villa would one receive a proper name; I was born Terza and then called Gervasio by my mother when I was baptized and relocated to the side building. This other Zent candidate could only have been Ferdinand, he who had also escaped the villa.

“They each have only a portion of the same Book,” Erwaermen continued. “I instructed them to fight to the death so that one could claim the remains from the other, but I cannot say when that might happen... Quinta’s rudeness considered, I would rather Myne complete her book and become the Zent.”

The other two candidates were in a position more troublesome than my own. One might think that put me at an advantage, but I needed to be wary of one of them dying and the other completing their Book.

And then it hit me.

Is it not likely that Quinta has already died, allowing Myne to obtain a complete Book?

Leonzio had informed me that Detlinde’s instant-death poison had not actually turned Ferdinand into a feystone. She had instead sealed him in Ahrensbach’s Mana Replenishment hall, where his mana was slowly being drained. Ehrenfest had requested—and

received—royal permission for Rozemyne to charge to his rescue, but Raublut had said nothing about his fate. I was told only that Ahrensbach's foundation was stolen and that the new aub imprisoned the Lanzenavians in the duchy.

Assuming that Myne was Rozemyne and Quinta was Ferdinand, it was possible she had gone not to save him but to absorb the wisdom from his feystone.

"Still..." Erwaermen said, "perhaps Yurgenschmidt's mana crisis is to blame for these unprecedented obstructions. This is the first time since its founding that the country's foundation has been this close to drying out completely."

That danger was the only reason he had yet to dispose of us.

Erwaermen continued, "Problems have arisen wherever one looks. We have a lackluster pool of candidates, but they will have to do. The alternative is total annihilation. Terza—fill the foundation at once."

I did not know how to reach it. The information was missing from my Book of Mestionora and could not be searched for—a consequence of not having obtained all the knowledge, no doubt.

If nothing else, I suspect Raublut can tell me where the royals supply their mana.

Despite the unexpected trouble, I now had a Book of Mestionora and the understanding that the other Zent candidates' Books were also incomplete. Moreover, Erwaermen's command that I replenish the foundation could be considered a formal recognition of my status as a candidate. That was a good enough result.

"As you will," I said. "I shall go to the foundation as quickly as I can."

An exit then appeared, which deposited me atop the Royal Academy's altar. I gazed down and saw an intense battle being fought below. There were capes of colors other than the familiar black and silver; other duchies must have noticed Raublut's maneuvering.

Raublut was protecting the altar to shield me and cried out for me to reveal my Grutrisheit. I spoke my chant, and the goddess-given book appeared. It looked entirely like the bible; one could not tell at a glance that its pages were incomplete. Those below fervently extolled me as the true Zent.

And with that, Yurgenschmidt should acknowledge my claim to the throne.

I was relieved, but only for a moment; a young woman shouted, “*Gruttrissheit!*” elsewhere in the auditorium. It had not occurred to me that another Zent candidate might be here. That was Myne, no doubt.

Did she take Quinta’s knowledge and come to meet Erwaermen as one with a complete Book of Mestionora? Did she come into conflict with Raublut in the process?

As I pondered, Myne began praying to the gods and strengthening her allies. Such prayers had never come up during my education, nor had Raublut informed me of them. I was learning for the first time that one’s prayers could reach the gods in Yurgenschmidt.

I opened my Book of Mestionora, wondering whether I, too, could grant such blessings. Its pages were covered with prayers to the gods.

These must be them.

I read the prayers aloud. My mana was drained and turned into a blessing that invigorated my comrades.

“Hmm. It would appear the gods grant me their blessings as well...”

The convenience of my Book and the might of the gods hit me all at once. I was moved, though I also understood what a grave threat Myne posed. She was Erwaermen’s favorite to become the next Zent. She had obtained the Book before I obtained mine and clearly understood it better than I did. And worst of all, once she was adopted, she would no doubt gain access to the archive beneath the library.

Even as a young woman yet to come of age, she seems to be the dominant Zent candidate.

I was focused on Myne, wanting to see what else her Book could do, when someone hit me with a surprise attack. Quinta had appeared atop the altar, having somehow managed to reach me. His appearance alone made it clear that we were blood relatives. He bore the distinct features of my elder sister Seradina.

So he lives.

I was surprised to see him. Erwaermen had instructed my fellow Zent candidates to slay each other. That they were both here, alive, told me their Books were still incomplete.

Now then, which of them do I stand to gain more from?

I considered which of my opponents to keep alive while Quinta

continued to target me. His strikes were rapid but unworthy of note; they bore little force or mana. So much for attacks only Zent candidates with the Book of Mestionora could perform. He made no attempt to even form his, so I could not learn from his example.

Should I dispatch him now and take his feystone before Myne can?

I moved to use the instant-death poison against Quinta, but Myne cried out before I could. A deluge of water swept through the auditorium below.

Is that a waschen?! Never have I seen one so fierce!

As my eyes widened in surprise, the whirlpool spat Myne up into the air. She fell toward us, so I grabbed and threw an offensive magic tool.

“Rozemyne!”

“Guh!”

Quinta hit me while I was distracted. Though I expected him to press the attack, he unmade that strange weapon of his and instead shot bands of light from his schtappe at Myne. It gave me more than enough time to drink a rejuvenation potion. I wanted to strike him while he was pointing up at the air, but a counter from Myne’s charms stalled me.

Ngh...

The moment I raised my shield above my head, Quinta threw a magic tool with his free hand. I could not guard against both attacks. Myne was rescued as I covered my face.

But why save her? And why are they both working against me?

They should have been trying to kill one another, but instead they were cooperating.

In terms of mana, neither one of my opponents posed a threat to me. I could easily eradicate them. The problem was that killing one would complete the other’s Book of Mestionora, which would put me in an even more troublesome situation.

Myne is far more dangerous than Quinta.

From what I could sense, her mana paled in comparison to my own. How curious, then, that she had not seemed to spend much through her prayers and magic.

I was unsure how to control my mana when it was being drawn from my body on its own, and the blessings I granted my allies had drained me even more than expected. Anyone who prayed for their comrades surely did so at the cost of their own combat potential, but Myne seemed entirely unfazed.

Am I simply not used to praying? Or does she have an abundance of top-quality rejuvenation potions?

On top of that, I could not have cast a waschen large enough to flood the auditorium. Her every action was beyond me, including what she was doing now.

“Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm.”

Myne prayed, and a dome formed around her with the same sharp noise as a blade being drawn. The divine instruments in the hands of the statues around us began to shine as if responding to her mana. Her actions were beyond prediction, and merely standing in her presence made me feel as though I were staring into a bottomless pit.

“Quinta is not someone you should protect,” I said. “In fact, as I understand it, you are duty bound to kill him and complete your Book. Was that not the order you received, Myne?”

“Cease your useless prattle and die,” Quinta said calmly. He swung his sword and sent a ball of rainbow mana toward me.

I recognized this attack. It was simple enough—charged mana launched with a swipe—and its power depended on one’s capacity. As one raised in Yurgenschmidt, I considered it nothing new.

Is that the best he can do? A simple charged attack?

Quinta was relentless, but his slight mana capacity and simplistic attacks made for a placid assault. I readied my shield, then leapt back to follow the mana and swung my short sword. I would slice open the flow of my opponent’s mana to create a safe spot. Avoiding the attacks of those with such little mana tended to be trivial.

Before I could slice through the attack, however, the statues around us drained the mana from my sword. Quinta’s orb shone brilliantly but was also absorbed before it could reach me. The divine instruments in the statues’ hands flashed, and pillars of light crossed through the air.

I suddenly felt weightless and like a strange force was pulling me somewhere. Then I was back in the Garden of Beginnings. I could conclude only that the gods had teleported us here. Erwaermen looked even more displeased than before, so I immediately knelt, feeling some surprise about the nature of our situation.

“What in the world are you three candidates doing?”

Erwaermen snapped. "Yurgenschmidt must be replenished with mana posthaste." He was exceptionally displeased at Myne and Quinta for keeping me from reaching the foundation.

I can only hope he smites them both for me.

In contrast to my show of respect, Quinta made his Book of Mestionora and protested. Myne was outright ignoring Erwaermen, too focused on trying to glimpse her companion's bible.

"Oh, come on! Let me read it for a little while! Don't be selfish!"

Did they not realize their predicament? They were standing before a former god. I now understood why Erwaermen had called Quinta insolent.

Erwaermen refused to accept Quinta's explanation. He ordered the man to disappear, then raised a hand and unleashed a slew of attacks. His expression did not change and his stance seemed relaxed, but each ball of divine mana was powerful enough to match the strongest attack I could muster. Quinta's shield and charms shattered one by one.

"Go forth, Terza," Erwaermen instructed. "Replenish this country's foundation."

I stood up to answer his call. There could not be a better outcome than the gods taking my side and eliminating my enemies. But my opponents were tenacious; even while weathering Erwaermen's attacks, Quinta managed to shoot me in the thigh. I crumpled to the ground, having lost my charms in our battle atop the altar. Erwaermen's support had put me too much at ease. I went to drink a rejuvenation potion.

"I told you not to interfere, Quinta."

Erwaermen was enraged. Quinta had angered the gods and would surely be eliminated. I, on the other hand, was being asked to replenish the foundation. I waited patiently for the healing to complete, assured of my safety.

Myne jumped in front of Quinta to protect him from Erwaermen's attacks. They would die together, I thought, but Myne cast another spell I did not recognize.

"Finsumhang!"

She spread out a black cape that absorbed Erwaermen's divine mana. I could not believe my eyes. Though she grimaced in pain, she shot her hands up into the air, and a radiant beam formed above them. Light rained down from the sky in response,

enveloping her in a cocoon that slowly ascended.

Now what?!

I could not fathom what Myne was doing, but Erwaermen seemed to understand; he stared at her in disbelief and muttered, “Mestionora?” Quinta simply watched in surprise, no longer having to endure an onslaught of attacks.

The cocoon slowly took human shape. Myne had returned. Her body flashed, and she stayed floating in midair. The light surrounding her remained as if radiating from within her. She slowly opened her eyes, which were more golden than before, and an overwhelming force compelled me to kneel. This being was on another level from me—a single glance confirmed it.

“Rozemyne!”

Quinta reached out to touch Myne but was immediately thrust back.

“Stand down, insolent one,” she said. Her voice was the same, but her tone was stern and dignified. There was a haughty look in her eyes, and the aura she exuded was far heavier than before. Though the being before us took Myne’s form, she was something else entirely.

“How rare of you to descend,” Erwaermen said. “Pray tell, what became of Myne?”

The being forced Quinta to his knees, then floated over to Erwaermen. “Rozemyne is in my library,” she said with a kind smile that could not have been further from the look of contempt she had given me and my fellow Zent candidate. “She asked me to save Quinta and quell your wrath.”

So... Myne summoned and manifested the Goddess of Wisdom? Is such a thing even possible?

Mestionora reached out to Erwaermen. “I shall grant you a portion of my heavenly power.”

“Are you certain...?” he asked, wearing a troubled frown.

“Wait a moment,” Quinta said. “You took Rozemyne’s form, but did she consent to you giving her power to Erwaermen?”

He was right to be concerned. Outside of emergencies, humans only shared their mana with their parents or maternal siblings, or when dyeing another’s mana in the case of a marriage or engagement. Erwaermen’s reaction made it clear that giving one’s “heavenly power” was just as abnormal.

The Goddess of Wisdom smiled and nodded. “She gave me

permission to use her body as I please. I wish to save you, Erwaermen, so I am deeply relieved to have this opportunity. Come now." Her cheeks flushed with joy as she took one of his hands. She asked that he raise the other, then exhaled and took it as well. Heavenly power gathered in her palms before moving into him.

We could only watch as Erwaermen was given new life. I could not say how much time passed, but the two eventually separated.

"Though our current Zent candidates are not without their flaws, we should not reduce their number," Mestionora said. "I hereby forbid the taking of any lives." Then she turned to Quinta and me. "That goes for everyone."

"Does this decree apply only to Zent candidates, or does it include those who came with me to Yurgenschmidt?" I asked. This was my chance to protect the Lanzenavians who followed me.

"It applies to all. The mana shortage is so extreme that we cannot waste any more lives."

"Wait," Quinta said. "Those who violated the laws of men must be punished. Would you forbid that on the basis of the divine? Is it your decree that crimes must not be disciplined?"

"Indeed. All life must be treasured. Those who violate my decree shall face divine punishment."

"Humans can die prematurely as the result of starvation, disease, and feybeast attacks. Would such incidents also warrant the gods' wrath?"

"I forbid only the deliberate taking of life. Deaths that result from one's environment do not count."

Quinta gave a resigned nod, having deduced that the Goddess of Wisdom could not be swayed. "Very well. I shall inform the royal and archducal families before we punish our prisoners. More important, however, is the matter of the new Zent. Only those who have spent their lives in Yurgenschmidt should be allowed to lead its nobles. The throne cannot go to the king of a foreign nation."

Quinta argued that I was ignorant of the nuances of ruling Yurgenschmidt and overall unsuited to becoming its Zent. Erwaermen was quick to discard that notion.

"My wish is for a new Zent to be born posthaste. I desire nothing else in particular. He who is motivated to rule may take the throne."

"Erwaermen," I said, "please decree that I am the new Zent." I explained Lanzenave's situation to him and Mestionora, stating that

I wished to take the throne in part to reward those who had assisted me. Moreover, when it came to quickly dyeing a foundation, those with more mana were obviously superior. I was better suited to rule.

“Do you wish to take the throne in his place?” Mestionora asked Quinta.

He thought for a moment, then said, “No, I do not. I wish to give the current royal family a magic tool *Grutrisheit*, minimizing the risk of any further discord, and revive the religious ceremonies of the past. In the long term, I shall ensure that more people obtain Books of Mestionora, returning us to the days when Zents were chosen from a pool of viable candidates.”

“A respectable goal,” Erwaermen agreed. “But it would take far too long. I do not care who takes the throne. Replenishing the foundation and keeping Yurgenschmidt alive are my main priorities.”

“So if *I* replenish the foundation, you will give me free rein to act as I please?” Quinta asked.

“Correct. Once the foundation is full, I shall again step back from the world of men.”

Quinta and I stared one another down. Not being able to kill would make it hard to eliminate my enemies and secure the foundation. The fighting would not stop until we had a fair way to decide who would take the throne, but nothing nonlethal came to mind.

“O Goddess of Wisdom,” I said, “please lend us your guidance. How can we decide the next Zent fairly and without death?”

“In the past, candidates compared the size of their Books, looking to see whose had the fewest gaps. But that would not be fair in this case.” The goddess sat on Erwaermen’s shoulder and pondered. “Whatever shall we do?”

“From the gods’ perspective, what are the most desirable qualities of a Zent?” Quinta asked. “Popularity? Mana capacity?”

“Mana capacity is essential, of course. I would also rather the candidate show mastery of using the Book I granted them. Erwaermen, what do you think?”

“I do not care as long as Yurgenschmidt is replenished.”

“I see...” Quinta paused in thought. “Over the course of this war, we have filled the country gates of Wind, Fire, and Darkness. Could we compete to also fill the gates of Earth, Water, and Light?”

We could demonstrate our talent for manipulating mana by searching our Books for the relevant teleportation circles and then drawing them. The more mana one had, the faster one could supply it, meaning our capacities could also be compared. And most important of all, our race would go toward replenishing Yurgenschmidt, making it a fruitful endeavor for Erwaermen. Both gods were in support of the idea.

“One must have the Book of Mestionora to access the country gates, so indeed, this is a suitable competition for Zent candidates,” Erwaermen declared. “The gods may decide who goes to which gate.”

Quinta must have been exceptionally confident in his talents to have proposed this competition, as my mana capacity was far greater than his. He asked several more questions and used the answers to formalize rules.

As someone who had spent almost his entire upbringing in the Adalgisa villa, I did not know the location of any country gate except Ahrensbach’s. Unable to participate in the discussion, I elected to do some research instead.

“Terza, does your Book allow you to access the country gates?” Mestionora asked.

I checked. Indeed, my Book contained several relevant teleportation circles. They were pocked with holes, but it was nothing a little cross-referencing would not fix.

“Yes, Goddess.”

“Excellent.”

It seemed that Mestionora also wanted me to become the Zent. Myne was an element of uncertainty now that she had a goddess inhabiting her, but in a race to supply mana, I was at a clear advantage.

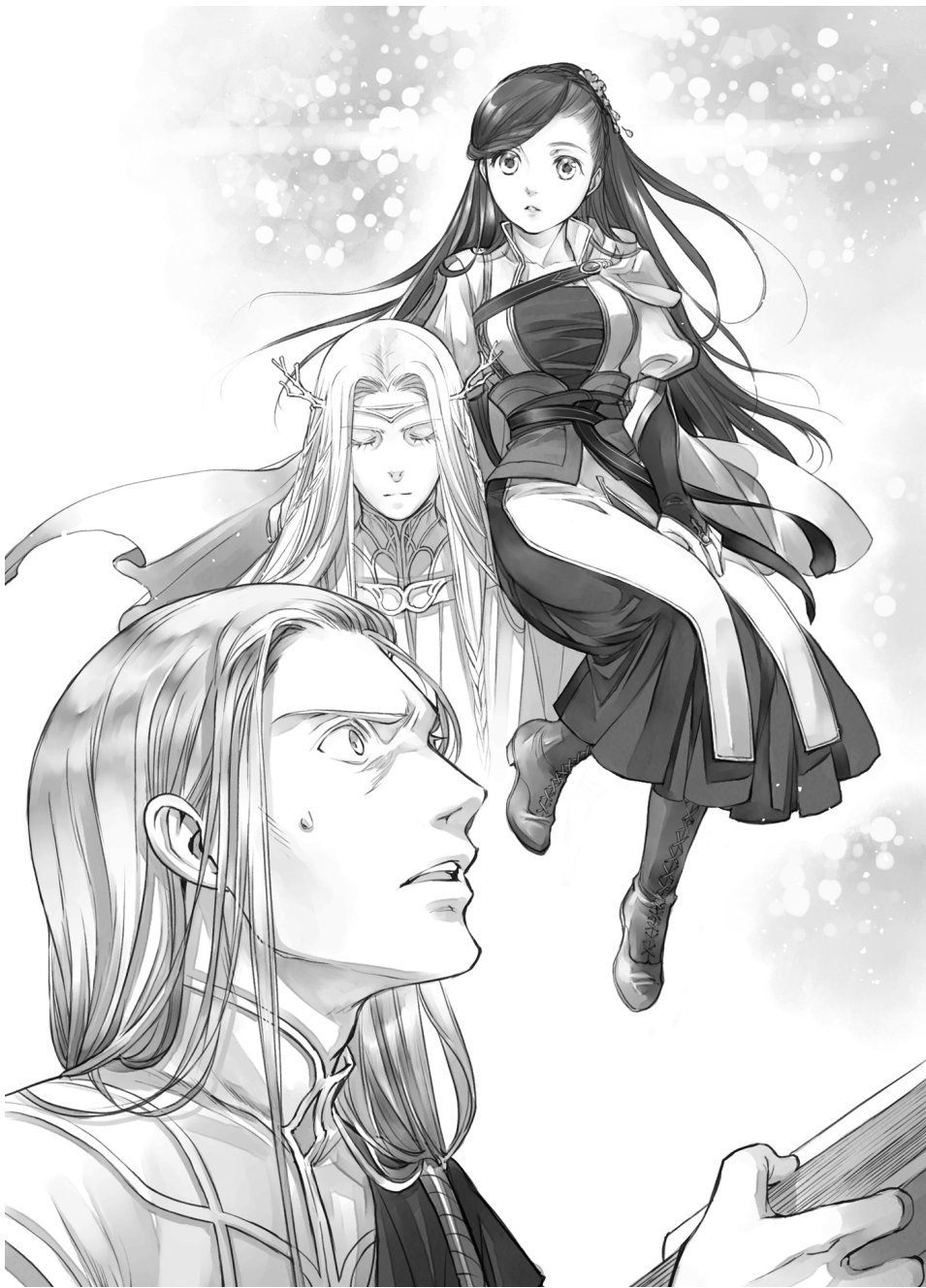
“Hmm...” Erwaermen paused in thought. “That reminds me, Mestionora—the light of your wisdom abruptly stopped while Terza was receiving his Book. Would you allow him to return here to obtain the rest?” He was concerned that my bible was still incomplete.

Mestionora’s eyebrows raised ever so slightly in response. She gestured me over to her, so I approached and opened my Book. A frown creased her forehead as she touched it.

“He can obtain the wisdom he lost while unfocused, but not the parts that were stolen from him,” she said. “More importantly...

Terza, it would seem your Book contains only fragments of the path to the foundation.”

My entire body went rigid. The gods had discovered the secret I was trying to keep from them. It terrified me to think how Erwaermen would respond. He wanted someone who could replenish Yurgenschmidt “posthaste.”



"I see," Erwaermen said, his tone sharp. "Terza would not be able to reach the foundation even upon becoming the new Zent."

"Quinta, what about Myne's and your Books?" Mestionora asked. She had called the girl "Rozemyne" before, though the significance of changing to "Myne" was lost on me.

He shook his head, not even bothering to make his Book for the goddess. "Mine is fragmented, so I expect hers is as well."

"In that case, I shall guide whoever wins to the foundation," Erwaermen decided.

I exhaled, relieved. There was hope for me yet.

"For this to remain a fair contest, the gods should refrain from helping or showing favoritism," Quinta said. "It seems to me that you both prefer Gervasio."

Mestionora accepted, but only for the duration of our race. She said it was only natural for the gods to favor those they liked and who prayed to them regularly while refusing to grant their protection to those who annoyed them. I took that to mean the gods thought positively of me.

Or they simply dislike Quinta.

Quinta had tried to attack Erwaermen mere moments ago, so Mestionora was anything but fond of him. She had been lightly crushing him ever since her arrival.

"My work here is done, so I shall take my leave. Call out to Myne if you want her to return. I would advise that Terza do it; Quinta's voice might not reach her anymore."

"What have you done to her?!" Quinta exclaimed, his expression morphing into one of horror.

Mestionora cocked her head and stared down at him, still on Erwaermen's shoulder. "I played with her mind to make her body easier to control, severing her connection to memories more important to her than her love of books. She *did* ask a goddess for help. Something of this nature cannot come without sacrifice."

Having a goddess descend and grant one's wish came at an even heavier cost than expected. Books were important, but I doubted they could ever outweigh a person's memories of their loved ones. Myne must have forgotten almost everything about her life.

Mestionora concluded, "The voice of someone she has forgotten is unlikely to reach her in my library."

“Is there a way to repair memories that have been severed...?”
Quinta asked at length.

I cared painfully little about this mess—it had nothing to do with me—but Quinta was intent on learning more from the goddess. She replied that channeling mana into Myne would restore her memories related to that one person but also indicated that Myne’s body would resist the mana of someone who was now a stranger to her.

“How would she react to someone she cannot even remember forcing his mana into her? You believe in the importance of permission, do you not? But most of all, Quinta... would you rather she remembers you or has forgotten you?”

The goddess gave Quinta a venomous smile and then vanished. The light radiating from Myne’s body began to fade, and she gently descended from Erwaermen’s shoulder.

“Rozemyme!”

Quinta rushed over and caught her body. He cried out her name again and again, but she did not react. Her memories of him really had been severed—an indication that she had cared about him more than books.

I was fine with the girl staying unconscious forever, but Quinta embraced her, took her hands in his, and started channeling his mana into her. Again and again, he called out to her. She must have been precious to him, for he was leaving himself wide open—unlike when we had fought atop the shrine.

I would never expect such compassion from my nephew.

His naked desperation almost made me laugh. He was showing weakness to an enemy—to a man he had tried to slaughter before Mestionora’s intervention. There were countless ways to eliminate one’s foes without killing them, whether it be through imprisonment, blackmail, or luring them into a trap. One had to be a genuine fool to deliver themselves to their opponent moments before a contest for the throne.

“Erwaermen, is she likely to return at all?” I asked. “If time is of the essence, we can leave her here and exclude her from the race.”

I expected to be met with agreement, but Erwaermen’s urgency had vanished since receiving Mestionora’s power. He gazed upon Myne and Quinta and said, “Be patient for now. Mestionora wanted all three of you to compete. The will of a goddess is best followed, so let us wait and see whether Quinta gets through to her.”

Disobeying the divine was out of the question, so I took out another of my rejuvenation potions and agreed to wait. For a reason unbeknownst to me, my mana had yet to fully recover. Maybe the battle atop the altar had drained me more than I thought, my wounds were slowing my regeneration, or the potions themselves were simply too weak. In any case, a mana-dependent contest lay ahead of us, so it made sense to focus on replenishing mine.

I seem to be running low.

I checked my supply of potions and frowned. Circling the shrines had cost me several, not to mention pouring mana into Mestionora's statue. I had used a potion before obtaining my Book, then another in the auditorium. I drank the one in my hand, leaving me with only one.

"You *are* Rozemyne, correct? Give me a proper response."

Myne regained consciousness just as my mana finished recovering. She engaged in some foolish back-and-forth with Quinta, once again acting like they were oblivious to the gravity of our situation. I only had so much patience, so I interjected and asked whether they were ready. That was when Myne finally came to her senses.

"Ah... Aaah! It's all coming back to me! We were in the heat of battle!"

The goddess's power lingered within her, causing her to glow a little, but her words and deeds were anything but divine. Watching her fumble was like witnessing Mestionora's descent into madness. She was sullyng my beautiful memories of the goddess, so I wished she would keep her mouth shut.

"We have no more time to waste," Erwaermen announced. "The race will now begin. The gods shall decide your destinations for you."

Light rained down on the three of us. Mine was golden, belonging to the Goddess of Light, meaning the divines had given me Gillesenmeyer.

"Now go," Erwaermen said. "Forge your own teleportation circles and replenish the country gates."

We all shouted, "*Grutrisheit!*" and made our Books of Mestionora. My research had given me enough information to draw the teleportation circle I needed. It was complex, but with a steady hand—

"Copy and place!"

A sudden cry drew me from my thoughts. I instinctively looked at Myne and saw she had drawn a teleportation circle in mere moments.

“What was that?” Erwaermen asked, sharing my confusion.

Myne did not respond; she simply teleported to Klassenberg with a smug look on her face. I frantically searched my Book of Mestionora but saw no record of the spell she had used.

“You will not find it,” Quinta said. “She created it from scratch.”

I gazed up from my Book and saw my opponent draw his own teleportation circle much faster than I expected. The speed with which his hand moved made his experience all too clear. No wonder he had proposed this race despite his inferior mana capacity.

My time as Lanzenave’s king had accustomed me to moving mana around, but the country had no materials containing any. My only chances to brew were when repairing magic tools that already existed. I was inexperienced with drawing magic circles and expected the process would take me longer than the others.

That said, his advantage is minor. It will not stop me from retaking the lead.

As I focused, trying to draw as quickly as I could, Quinta shot my hand. I dropped my Book of Mestionora and slumped over, creating an opportunity he used to shoot and destroy my teleportation circle.

“What?! You coward...!”

“We were instructed not to kill one another,” Quinta said plainly. “There were no rules against mere obstruction. That wound will not prove fatal; this rejuvenation potion will close it for you.” He sneered and threw a capped bottle in my direction. It clattered along the white stone and rolled over to me.

“Hmm... Indeed,” Erwaermen mused, agreeing with my opponent for some unfathomable reason. “There were no rules against you interfering with one another. It is poor manners, but this would not be the first time Quinta has been so tactless.”

Having managed to delay me, Quinta held up his Book next to his completed circle and said, “*Kehrschluessel*. Klassenberg.” To my surprise, he was going not to his own gate but to Myne’s. She must have been partway through replenishing it.

I was unsure what to think. Quinta had already obstructed me;

was he now going to interfere with Myne? He had seemed so desperate to protect her a moment ago, but perhaps he had only been trying to fool me and earn her trust. If so, his heart was as black as the darkest night. I could not allow the plans of such an evil man to come to fruition.

“Erwaermen. I require assistance...”

Restorative blessings could only be used on others, and uncapping a potion with a wounded hand was no easy feat. Thus, I called upon the only other person with me. Even if he could not heal me, he would at least be able to summon someone.

However, Erwaermen merely cocked his head at me. “Hm? What are you saying, Terza? It was just established that gods cannot intervene. Quinta gave you a potion—use it. If you do not act quickly, the others may steal an even greater march on you.”

Can he not see my wound...? And in any case, how can he expect me to use Quinta's rejuvenation potion? The man openly declared that he wished to obstruct me. Does Erwaermen truly believe this concoction is genuine? I thought he wanted me to become the Zent over the other two.

I was stunned that we saw the situation so differently. It reminded me of Quinta's remark that the ways of men and gods could not be compared. The gods' incomprehensible perspective and my uncertain future swirled unpleasantly in my heart.

It is much too late to back out.

Using my limp hand, I somehow managed to bring my last rejuvenation potion up to my lips and drink it. I could feel it working, but it was taking a suspiciously long time to heal my wound. Just what had Quinta shot me with? I anxiously waited for the pain to fade, then resumed drawing my circle.

“*Kehrschluessel*. Gilessenmeyer.”

The teleportation circle took me to a room with rainbow walls. I had passed through country gates when leaving Yurgenschmidt for Lanzenave and when returning via Ahrensbach, but this was my first time properly entering one.

Zents are required to open and close these gates as well as supply them with mana.

My thoughts wandered to days gone by. Though I grew up a branch royal, unlike my sisters, I was never permitted to attend the Royal Academy. I was the future king of Lanzenave, so I was

encouraged not to learn about Yurgenschmidt and to instead focus on the country I would go on to rule. I went along with it back then, but now I understood the true reason. Listening to Quinta and Erwaermen speak in the Garden of Beginnings had opened my eyes to the fact that more had been kept from me than I realized.

But now I can carry out my own research.

I checked my Book to see what I should do next, then pressed it against the nearest wall. Mana passed through it and into the country gate.

Quinta's obstruction had delayed my teleportation, but this race was far from over. Myne was probably facing her own problems, and Quinta was wasting his time trying to interrupt us. Impatience took over, and I pressed my Book against the wall with greater force, hoping my mana would move faster.

"Huh?!"

My hand suddenly twisted in the air, causing me to stumble forward. I could not comprehend the reason, but then I tried to channel more mana into the gate. My Book of Mestionora had vanished.

"Does this mean I finished supplying the gate?"

I decided to consult my bible. If nothing else, it would tell me how to confirm that my work here was done.

"Grutrissheit... Grutrissheit!"

No matter how many times I repeated the spell, my Book did not reappear. In fact, I could no longer even form my schtappe. Such an important tool that had been with me since just before my coming of age was gone.

"What is going on?!" I exclaimed. "What is happening?!"

My voice quavered. I was unaware of anything that could cause one's schtappe to disappear—another inadequacy in my education, perhaps. And without my Book of Mestionora, I could not investigate what was happening or how to resolve it.

My mind went blank, and my throat burned as it became hard to breathe. I searched my belongings and the inside of the gate for anything that might help me, but there was nothing. Not a single means of escape. I could not even open the gate and pass through Gilessenmeyer.

Could this be another of Quinta's obstructions?

The thought came to me as I once again looked around, feeling more and more like I was trapped in a cage. His sneer upon

shooting me in the hand said it all. I could not prove it, but I was convinced this was all part of his scheme.

I choked, so overcome with rage that my body trembled and my head started to burn. This was beyond cruel. I raised my hand, now without a schtappe, and slammed it against the nearest wall.

In accordance with his promise to the goddess, Quinta had not taken my life. I was still alive. But alive or not, without a schtappe, I could not live as a Yurgenschmidt noble or even return to being the king of Lanzenave.

If I failed to become the Zent, what would happen to Raublut and the others who assisted me? How would those who came from Lanzenave be punished? The country's ivory buildings would collapse without a schtappe-wielding king to succeed me. The faces of wives, children, and grandchildren I had wanted to bring to Yurgenschmidt flashed through my mind.

"O gods, is such malicious obstruction permitted in a contest to decide the true Zent?! I beseech you to punish Quinta! To save me! Evil of this nature must not be forgiven!"

But no matter how much I shouted, my schtappe never returned, and my prayers did not reach the gods.

Ferdinand — A Battle That Must Be Won

This is not someone I can fight and defeat head-on.

I was in the Royal Academy's auditorium, doing battle with an opponent whose mana surely exceeded that of anyone in Yurgenschmidt. The Adalgisa villa took great care to maximize the capacities of those born there, and even then, Gervasio was said to have been head and shoulders above the rest. He was also the king of Lanzenave, and it seemed painfully unlikely he had rested on his laurels; I expected the man to have been compressing his mana ever since taking the throne.

As the only member of his country with a schtappe, Gervasio was tasked with supplying Lanzenave alone. One needed only to consider how many archducal family members were required to sustain a single duchy to realize just how strong he must have been, carrying the weight of an entire nation on his shoulders with the support of perhaps his predecessor at most. He knew how to keep his mana expenditure to a minimum while still dealing truly devastating blows.

As I am now, his mana capacity and technique are far greater than my own.

I rained attacks on Gervasio simply to keep him from fighting back. Once he became accustomed to my various tools and retaliated, my defeat would come in a matter of moments. My opponent appeared to have no weapons of note besides his instant-death poison, but even then, I was barely able to keep up with him. I was struck with bitterness as he deftly and easily blocked my attacks.

However... this is a war, not a duel.

We had come here to stop Gervasio from becoming the Zent. It did not matter how many of us fell in the process; as long as we kept him from the throne, victory was ours. In that regard, subjugating the Adalgisa villa with a surprise attack in the dead of night and seizing his resources had proved crucial. It was less of a blow than I would have liked, but it did raise our chances of success.

Atop the altar, Gervasio continued to drink rejuvenation potions. I did not know how many he had with him, but I doubted there were many or that he was concealing any offensive magic tools; he had come to the Royal Academy not to fight but to visit the library and obtain the Book of Mestionora. There was also a chance he would not be able to use all the potions at his disposal, depending on their strength.

I shall gradually deplete his potions and mana. Does he have any other openings?

Gervasio had just obtained his Book of Mestionora, so he had yet to master using it. Furthermore, considering Lanzenave's focus on maintaining tools and structures that already existed, he would not have much experience using mana to create something new. That was the only area in which I could surpass him. If something happened to give him the upper hand there as well, he would turn the tables on me in mere moments.

Or so I thought. In the events that followed, Mestionora revealed that Gervasio's book was fragmented—a consequence of our earlier interference. It was complete enough that he could patch up most of the gaps in the underground archive, but for now, I was at a comfortable advantage. Rozemyne's absurd actions had worked in my favor.

If winning through a direct battle is out of the question, I must work

in the shadows, set traps, and prey on my opponent's weaknesses.

I pretended to heed the Goddess of Wisdom's advice, then proposed that we race to fill the country gates with mana. The entire time, I manipulated the conversation and ensured the rules would suit my intentions.

"Now go. Forge your own teleportation circles and replenish the country gates."

"Grutrisshheit!"

At once, we three Zent candidates formed our Books of Mestionora to make teleportation circles. Rozemyne used the replication spell she had created to finish her circle in an instant, then teleported away.

Perhaps I should have learned it after all.

There had not been time for me to practice the spell, but seeing Rozemyne use it once again made its convenience all too apparent.

Erwaermen and Gervasio were stunned to have witnessed a brand-new spell. The latter scoured his Book of Mestionora in an attempt to find it, but he never would. It was Rozemyne's invention and would not appear in the Book until she or I died.

I observed Gervasio while drawing my magic circle. His speed was of no particular note. Maintenance was the priority in Lanzenave, and its kings had few opportunities to brew, create magic tools, or draw magic circles.

Destroying my opponent's circle would force him to draw it anew, but how much time would that buy me? Was he completely focused on the matter at hand, or was he watching me in turn? I could not miss even the slightest detail.

If my next move fails, my entire plan will crumble to dust.

I continued to eye Gervasio as I came close to finishing my circle, then carefully retrieved one of my magic tools. Hopefully, he had not noticed the slight movement of my cape.

Gervasio suddenly turned to look at me. He recoiled a little when our eyes met, but he was focused on my almost complete teleportation circle. His was not even halfway done. I could guess from the slight crease in his brow that he was bitter about not being able to match my speed.

Maybe he was still shaken by Rozemyne's new spell, or maybe he was stressed about being so far behind me, but Gervasio simply returned to completing his teleportation circle. He was not paying attention to me in the slightest.

Now!

Upon completing my teleportation circle, I shot Gervasio in the hand to further distract him, then shot his circle, causing it to dissipate.

“What?! You coward...!” Gervasio barked. He had crumpled to the ground, but it was only a flesh wound; as per Mestionora’s wishes, my attack was meant to slow him down, not claim his life. As much as he thought it was spineless, it was his own fault for letting his guard down.

I threw a potion in his direction. “We were instructed not to kill one another. There were no rules against mere obstruction.”

“Hmm... Indeed,” Erwaermen agreed. “There were no rules against you interfering with one another.”

Gervasio’s eyes widened in unwarranted disbelief. The gods would not interfere as long as Mestionora’s decree was being followed. Their only concern was whether men upheld the agreements they made with the divine, which became blatantly obvious if one considered exactly when the gods had intervened throughout Yurgenschmidt’s long history.

The gods do not think as men do. Gervasio needs to realize that.

As long as I gave him a rejuvenation potion and made it clear I was not trying to dispatch him, not even the Goddess of Wisdom would complain. It was unlikely Gervasio would drink the potion for fear of poison, but I did not care; the gesture was meant only to reassure the gods. In the event that he *did* consume it, though, he would quickly discover its purpose—using the drinker’s mana to completely heal their wounds and restore their stamina.

For as long as he cannot use his hand, Gervasio will need to drink a potion of some kind.

Drinking my rejuvenation potion would drain his mana. Drinking his own would deplete his stock even further. His next move was guaranteed to benefit me.

Before my opponent could recover from his daze, I raised my Book of Mestionora before my completed teleportation circle. “*Kehrschluessel. Klassenberg.*”

Upon my arrival at the Earth gate, Rozemyne welcomed me with dubious eyes. “Based on prior experience, I suspect you’re here to sabotage the race that Mestionora and Erwaermen set up. You can’t hide anything from me!”

If she understood the situation as well as she claimed, we would not need to waste time with unnecessary explanations. But alas, her next words proved she had completely missed the mark. She sincerely asked me to “play fair,” which was so foolish it made my head ache. Had she forgotten that not just her life but the lives of everyone she knew depended on the outcome of this contest? I could not believe those words had come from a woman so emotionally fragile that a single battle had given her an incapacitating aversion to feystones.

Could this have resulted from Mestionora's interference?

The goddess had claimed to have severed any memories that might interfere with Rozemyne's love of reading. If that included negative memories, then perhaps Rozemyne no longer remembered the more brutal aspects of this war. It worried me what she might have forgotten, but those she cared about most were generally from the lower city.

Rozemyne seemed fine for now, so I elected not to say anything until the fighting was over. I did not have time to find out which people she still remembered, how many of her memories had vanished, and whether commoners without mana would even be able to restore them.

“Once you have finished supplying mana, return to the Royal Academy and summon your retainers. Listen to them well, then ensure you rest in the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Is that understood?”

My instructions were meant to limit Rozemyne's movements. She was somewhat naive and rarely read between the lines, so Gervasio could easily manipulate her. The last thing we needed was for her to develop unnecessary sympathy for the Lanzenavians and start behaving in unexpected ways.

“Is there anything for me to do other than Mana Replenishment?” Rozemyne asked. That she was even inquiring meant she was likely to follow my instructions.

By sending Rozemyne to the Ehrenfest Dormitory, I would separate her from the bloodshed. I could not risk her following me to where I was going next; her bleeding heart would obstruct my plans and guarantee their failure.

Even with her goddess-dyed mana, Rozemyne is still, well... Rozemyne.

She was so full of divinity that she was faintly shining, but her actions and expression could not have been more distinct from

when she was hosting Mestionora. I was relieved to see her acting as I remembered but also irritated that the goddess's influence lingered. It was yet unclear how much damage the possession had done to Rozemyne's memories, and it frustrated me that I could not investigate immediately. Still, I would exploit the situation as much as I could.

I gave Rozemyne a light push on the shoulder, causing her to stumble. "If even that was enough to disrupt your balance, then you will need more practice."

Rozemyne was too unsteady on her feet to pass as the avatar of a goddess; her retainers would need to retrain her how to dedication whirl and move with grace. I formed my Book of Mestionora, planning what I was going to say.

The rest is a race against time. Am I going to make it?
"Kehrschluessel. Ersterde."

Once back at the Royal Academy, I sprinted in the direction of the auditorium. I sent several ordonnances along the way.

"Aub Dunkelfelger, this is Ferdinand. At the order of the Goddess of Wisdom, do *not* kill any of the prisoners. I cannot predict what manner of punishment will befall those who violate her will. Inform all those in charge of prisoners in the palace and the Adalgisa villa."

"Prince Anastasius, this is Ferdinand. Please wait in the auditorium and prepare for more combat. Ehrenfest will provide any rejuvenation potions or such that you require."

"Eckhart, this is Ferdinand. Make sure Prince Anastasius gets what he needs, then have Rozemyne's retainers gather in the auditorium."

Dunkelfelger's knights now had control of the central building; there were no black capes anywhere, only blue. Raublut had probably been defeated as well. I did not have any evidence, but the force with which Aub Dunkelfelger and Lady Magdalena had rushed into the auditorium gave me good reason to believe I was right.

"Lord Ferdinand, where in the world have you been?!" Justus exclaimed, briskly approaching me as I arrived outside the auditorium.

"Contact Professor Hirschur and the knights in Ehrenfest's teleportation hall. Get them to open the dormitory at once. Tell the aub to prepare a room in which Rozemyne can rest when she

returns and the tea party room in preparation for a meeting with the royal family.”

Justus repeated my instructions back to me, completely unfazed, then raised an eyebrow. “Ehrenfest is busy with its own cleanup. Are you sure they will accept?”

“Frame it as an opportunity for them to provide rear support during a decisive battle for the Sovereignty. They will not refuse us then. The sun rose some time ago; their attendants will already be at work, and an emergency message will easily reach the archduke.”

“Understood.”

Justus then took his leave, sending ordonnanzes as he made his way to the teleportation corridor.

I opened the door to the auditorium, gave Rozemyne’s guard knights their instructions, and then entrusted the prisoners being held in the Adalgisa villa to Strahl. Aub Dunkelfelger would oversee the palace’s captives and the safety of the Royal Academy. To keep Lady Magdalena from interfering, I tasked her with looking after King Trauerqual and Prince Hildebrand.

As I gave the last of my orders, Prince Anastasius and his retinue of guard knights approached me. I started toward the door to meet with them, accepting rejuvenation potions and offensive magic tools from Eckhart as I went.

“Raublut has been captured,” the prince said. “What more is there to be done?”

“The capture of a small fry like Raublut does not mark the end of this war,” I said. “Gervasio must be imprisoned as well.”

Anastasius took in a sharp breath, having most likely remembered the man’s Book of Mestionora. “He’s still alive? I thought you would have finished him.”

“A goddess has ordered that no more lives be taken. We must eliminate Gervasio without killing him, and to that end, we must go to the Sovereign temple.”

“The Sovereign temple...?” Anastasius repeated, bewildered.

I saw no reason to elaborate and instead started down the hallway connected to the dormitories. Heissitze followed, acting on an order from his aub. I did not mind as long as he did not get in my way.

“Prince Anastasius,” I said, “what is the status of the royal palace? Can we expect to pass through unmolested on our way to the Sovereign temple? We are under serious time constraints and

must get there without delay.”

“The palace isn’t sealed, and its doors are open wide enough that Dunkelfelger’s knights have been passing through with their prisoners. You’ll need royal authority to access the temple, but...” He paused, and a look of realization crossed his face. “Don’t tell me *that’s* why you asked me here. Is this any way to treat royalty?!”

I sneered at him. The very idea that the royal family deserved my respect was laughable. “It was not the only reason,” I said. “There is so much more I need you to do.”

“You’re acting out of line. You were before, and you definitely are now.”

“Where do you think we are? This is a battlefield. If we do not stop Gervasio soon, you will not even be a royal anymore. By the goddess’s decree, he will need to spare you, but the things he will do will make you wish you were dead.”

Raublut’s defeat had lulled Anastasius into a false sense of security. He had not even thought about Gervasio becoming the next Zent.

“If we are too late, we will not win,” I said. “Gervasio is stronger than I am.”

“What?! That can’t be right. You had him pinned down atop the altar!”

“I merely kept him from retaliating by showering him with as many kinds of attacks as I could manage. He blocked them all with ease.”

Anastasius and his guard knights looked at me with hard eyes. If nothing else, they finally seemed to grasp the danger we were facing. The prince grabbed a feystone and prepared to send an ordonnanz.

“Mother, this is Anastasius. I am going to the Sovereign temple. For lack of time, we must race through the palace on our highbeasts. Please open the balcony nearest to the door!”

As he continued to send messages, the prince’s brisk walk turned into a run. The rest of us kept his pace, and together we burst through the teleportation door to the palace.

“We can mount our highbeasts when we reach the wider halls,” Anastasius exclaimed. “But until then, we need to run!”

Up ahead, I saw several black-capes working with Dunkelfelger’s knights. Things here had calmed down somewhat since the rebellion was quelled. The scholars I glimpsed were likely

at work rather than evacuating.

“Prince Anastasius,” I said, “Gilessenmeyer, Hauchletzte, and Klassenberg are going to inquire about their country gates. Order the scholars to send you an ordonnanz when they do.”

“Their country gates?” he replied, slightly winded. “Why?”

“You could tell them a goddess descended upon Yurgenschmidt, but I would consider it a waste of time. Neither the scholars nor the concerned duchies would understand. We need only know *when* they try to contact you.”

There was no reason to explain precisely what was happening at the gates. I simply wanted as much information as I could get about Rozemyne’s and Gervasio’s progress.

“I would doubt you if not for your disappearing act atop the altar,” Anastasius said. “But yes, understood. Mergitor, stay in the palace and serve as our go-between with the scholars.”

Though the prince looked dissatisfied, he did as I advised and instructed one of his knights to stay behind. Mergitor took his leave from us and sprinted in another direction, sending ordonnanzes all the while. His contact with the scholars would keep me abreast of the gate situation, I hoped.

“From here, we use our highbeasts.”

We followed the prince’s guard knights as they led us down the palace’s wider corridors. Ahead of us, attendants stood near a balcony with its doors wide open. We shot through, then landed on the balcony of another building and rushed inside.

The royal palace had originally been built by a Zent who wished to keep their family on the throne forever. They had designed it specifically in anticipation of an attack from the Royal Academy, so there were plenty of confusing twists and turns between the Academy’s teleportation door and the Sovereign temple. First-time visitors would be lucky to make it through at all. If not for Anastasius, I would most likely have run out of time before even reaching the temple.

“This is Mergitor,” said a newly arrived ordonnanz.

“Klassenberg has just sent word. They want to know why their country gate is shining.”

I calculated roughly how long it would take for word to travel from Klassenberg to the royal palace. Gervasio had probably recovered from his wound and redrawn his teleportation circle. I wanted to reach the Sovereign temple before Gilessenmeyer sent

word, else I feared the Lanzenavian king would finish supplying his country gate.

“Prince Anastasius,” I said, “you must forbid the duchies not involved in this battle from entering the Royal Academy. Let it be known that anyone who arrives without permission will promptly be deemed an enemy and cut down.”

“Ferdinand, that—”

“King Trauerqual is under the influence of trug. A single nudge from a bad actor could drop the royal family into an even more precarious situation.”

“I will contact Mother.”

Giving the prince a moment to send his ordonnanz, I turned to those behind me. “Heissshitze, convey the same message to your aub. Those who did not fight to save Yurgenschmidt have no business obstructing those of us who did.”

“Understood!”

Anastasius’s head guard led us downstairs, then indicated the teleportation door to the Sovereign temple. The prince opened it while the rest of us dismounted our highbeasts, and we passed through one by one—a veritable swarm of armored knights.

A blue priest and two grays I assumed to be his attendants were guarding the door on the other side. They stared at us in shock before the blue priest cried, “What is the meaning of this?!”

“We have business with the Sovereign High Bishop,” I said. “Where are his chambers?”

“Business of what kind?” the blue priest asked despite Anastasius being with us. “We were not told to expect anyone, and your arrival was far too militant for—”

I grabbed the man by his robes and yanked him toward me. “I asked for the location of the High Bishop’s chambers. Our business is urgent, so answer. *Now.*”

“Eep! How dare you lay hands on a priest serving the gods!”

The man’s lips were evidently sealed, so I struck him with a punch and callously let him drop. Then I rounded on the two gray priests. They were not used to violence and pointed the way without even the slightest pause.

“The High Bishop’s chambers are at the far end of that hallway!”

We sped in the indicated direction, and within moments, alarm bells started to ring. Ehrenfest’s temple had a similar warning

system; the grays must have activated their magic tools to announce our invasion. I had let them be, assuming there would not be much they could do, but this was problematic. We could not risk Immanuel running away or hiding somewhere.

“I should have broken their arms and legs...” I mused.

“Those were priests!” Anastasius cried. “Were you not once a man of the temple?!”

The prince was surprisingly quick to preach for a man who had once looked down on temple ceremonies and studying ancient language. Or had this faith come about from his interactions with Rozemyne? No matter the case, I spared him only a glance; I did not want his troublesome ethics to get in the way.

“It matters not,” I said. “Nobles or priests, anyone who stands in our way must be eliminated.”

The same went for royals. I did not have the time to start being considerate of those who obstructed me or to scour the temple.

As we continued toward the High Bishop’s chambers, more priests rushed out of doors up ahead to stop us. “Halt, intruders!” they exclaimed. “You shall go no farther!”

In no time at all, the hallway was awash with blue and gray priests. Did they truly think they would be able to stop us? Their lack of exposure to violence had made them tragically naive.

“Knock aside those who obstruct us and secure Immanuel,” I said. “Be quick, but do not kill anyone. I would rather we finish this before word arrives from Gilessenmeyer.”

“Yes, my lord!” Eckhart replied. He sprang into action before anyone else, transforming his schtappe into a sword and cutting a path around the priests who stood in our way. “Move!”

Blood splattered against the walls and the other priests, who screamed when they saw the knight tearing through them. Many of them scattered without a second thought.

“Aaagh! Protect the High Bishop!”

“High Bishop! The intruders!”

Several priests rushed to the High Bishop’s chambers, crying to be let in. We closed in on them, kicking and swinging our weapons at anyone who tried to stop us.

“High Bishop! *High Bishop!* Please open the door!”

“Out of the way!”

Eckhart started slicing through the door, showing no restraint for the grays clinging to it. I stepped closer and kicked them aside.

“Eckhart, do not damage the inside of the room!”

My knight twitched, then swung his sword several more times. The attacks seemed considerably lighter than before but still made short work of the door, which clattered to the floor in pieces.

We passed through the now-empty doorway to find only blue- and gray-robed priests. Immanuel was nowhere to be seen. Most of them panicked when they saw us, but one blue priest stood calm and still.

“Where is Immanuel?” I asked.

“There,” the man answered, indicating a locked door within the chambers. He explained that the room beyond it contained many objects usable only by the Sovereign High Bishop.

“If that is where the medals are stored, I may need to open it by force...”

“The door is enchanted, and Sovereign High Bishops have used it for generations; I would rather you not destroy it. No one here has the know-how to repair it, and it would cause no end of problems if the valuables inside the room were destroyed. I can simply draw Brother Immanuel out, so please, stay your hand a moment.”

Perhaps the priest was right and the room really *was* magical. In such a case, destroying the door would make everything inside disappear. I could not say what that would mean for the medals we were seeking.

“How do you intend to draw him out?” Anastasius asked.

“If you remove all the other priests from these chambers, I can inform Brother Immanuel that the intruders have been detained.”

This priest intrigued me. He did not falter even when speaking to a prince and displayed a stronger will than I would expect from a temple attendant. Even more curiously than that, he did not seem loyal to Immanuel.

“And what is your name?” I asked.

“Curtiss. I am an attendant assigned to the High Bishop’s chambers. I previously served Brother Relichion.”

Immanuel must have eliminated Relichion and taken over as the High Bishop. Curtiss was here only during the handover period and did not recognize Immanuel as his new charge.

“See to it, then.”

Anastasius’s guard captured the other priests in the High Bishop’s chambers, silenced them, and then removed them from the

room to prevent them from interfering. We moved out of sight of the locked door and waited as Curtiss lured out our target.

“Brother Immanuel, the intruders have been detained,” he said. “I would appreciate your input on how we should punish them.”

“Hmph. It is my duty to punish heretics...” came an arrogant-sounding voice. The door opened, and out strode Immanuel. He made it barely a few steps before I bound him with bands of light and took the key to the storeroom from his hand.

“Hartmut,” I said, “retrieve everything in this man’s possession, from his keys to his bible. Do not be deceived by any fakes.”

“I swear on my honor as the High Priest of Ehrenfest.”

“Aah, that reminds me. After interrogating Blasius, Justus reported that the Sovereign High Bishop cooperated with Raublut in exchange for Rozemyne being sent to the Sovereign temple. Find out what he intended to do with her. And remember to use a magic circle; we do not want him dying on us.”

“But of course.”

Leaving the Sovereign High Bishop to Hartmut, I turned to Curtiss. “Can anyone who holds the key access the storeroom? Is that where the medals are being stored, do you know?”

“Yes, the medals are in there. Blue priests are tasked with putting them in the storeroom after religious ceremonies, but those not registered to the temple cannot enter, and only the Sovereign High Bishop can use the key.”

I gazed down at the key. I needed only register my mana to it, so I overwrote its previous owner and did just that. Then I opened the storeroom.

“That is not a problem,” I said. “Guide me.”

Curtiss led me to where the medals were stored—a few sizable shelves stacked with various articles. Sitting atop them were large medal storage boxes just like the ones in Ehrenfest’s temple. Finding them on my own would not have been easy.

“These boxes are for commoners, and these are for people with unknown affiliations,” Curtiss said. “Brother Relichion once told me they were only to be moved at the royal family’s request, but Brother Immanuel took some out the other day. As you have a prince with you now, I would appreciate you returning them to their proper location.”

Curtiss indicated two flat boxes separate from the boxes for commoners, each containing a white medal. I snatched up a nearby

tool and checked to whom they belonged. One was unmistakably Gervasio's, while the other was Chiaffredo's.

"I see..." the priest mused aloud. "Nobles can use that magic tool to view information about the medals. I was not aware. Aah, please put the medals in this if you intend to take them with you."

Curtiss held out a small box, into which I placed both medals. I was about to hurry out of the storeroom when I spotted the High Bishop's bible.

"So the bible is kept here as well," I said. "Curtiss, where is the key?"

The priest went pale. "Um... That bible is passed down from one Sovereign High Bishop to the next, and..." He did not want me to take the book outside the storeroom, as expected of a man in his role.

"I am aware. Once everything is over, I intend to return the bible to the Sovereign High Bishop—not that you need to believe me. Now tell me where to find the key. I do not have time to waste, so speak quickly unless you wish to experience true pain."

"I shall choose to believe you," Curtiss replied at length. "The key is here."

The priest claimed to have put his faith in me, but he could not have seemed more reluctant as he handed me the key. I registered my mana to it, opened the bible, and confirmed it was genuine. Then I exited the storeroom.

Back in the High Bishop's chambers, I saw Hartmut grinning as a bloodied Immanuel screamed in agony. Anastasius and his guards were doing their best not to look. The prince rushed over the moment he spotted me.

"Ferdinand, stop him! He's done far more than was necessary!"

I grimaced. This must have been the prince's first time witnessing an interrogation. We did not have leeway to start bothering Hartmut, but alas...

"You will need a focused mind to perform your next task, so I suppose I must intervene. But in return for stopping Hartmut, I must ask that you keep assisting me."

"Have I not done enough already?"

I said that only as a courtesy. You will not escape me in any case.

"Hartmut, leave the rest for later," I said. "Discuss the coronation of the new Zent and the dedication whirling with Curtiss."

“Lady Rozemyne’s whirling?” Hartmut asked.

“Indeed. The Divine Avatar of Mestionora is going to bestow the Grutrissheit upon a new Zent. You will need to communicate with the Sovereign temple if you are to oversee such a crucial ceremony.”

“How splendid! Praise be to the gods!”

Hartmut stood up and prayed, kicking Immanuel away in the process. Curtiss recoiled, so I gave him an encouraging nudge toward the overeager fanatic. I also instructed Heissshitze to give Immanuel a rejuvenation potion—the High Bishop’s groans were much too distracting—and told Eckhart to perform a waschen to clean away the blood.

Content that our sensitive prince had nothing more to complain about, I removed Gervasio’s medal from its box. “Now then, Prince Anastasius... If you would.”

“Oh, I almost forgot to mention—an ordonnanz from Mergitor arrived while you were in that room. Gilessenmeyer inquired about their country gate.”

In other words, Gervasio had already begun supplying his gate. He had plenty of mana, so who knew how quickly he would finish? I made a more deliberate attempt to give Anastasius the medal.

“Prince Anastasius—you must destroy this medal at once.”

“What?! You want *me* to do it?!”

“Of course. Medals belonging to the Sovereignty can be destroyed only by members of the royal family. That is why I brought you.”

Just as only Ehrenfest’s archducal family could use Ehrenfest medals, only royals could use medals belonging to the Sovereignty. Had that requirement not existed, I would have broken Gervasio’s immediately upon finding it.

“Still, the spell and magic circle for destroying medals...”

Anastasius muttered, searching for an excuse. He could easily have requested my assistance, but he fell silent, not even attempting to take the medal from me.

Infuriated, I drew the spell and magic circle on some fey paper, which I then thrust into the prince’s hands with the white medal. “Gods above! Just fill the circle with mana and say the words to the spell already! The goddess has ordered that no lives be taken, so we must act while Gervasio is in Gilessenmeyer. Do not hesitate to eliminate those who would steal the throne from the royal family!”

Anastasius recoiled, then accepted the paper and medal. He moved far enough away from his guards that they would not hear the spell, then took out his schtappe.

“Prince Anastasius,” I said, “please make sure I can see the medal. Hide your mouth and speak quietly when reciting the spell.”

He glared at me, then swung his schtappe. Wavering black flames appeared above the magic circle. Anastasius gazed into them, raised a hand to cover his mouth, and chanted the spell as instructed. Then he tossed the white medal onto the circle.

I wonder, will it burn from the outside in? Or will it crack first and then burn?

One curious fact omitted from the Royal Academy’s curriculum was that medals burned differently when their owner was in the same duchy. I watched closely to see how Gervasio’s would change. It cracked into several pieces, then turned to gray ash and disappeared.

I win, Gervasio!

Without even thinking, I balled my hands into tight, victorious fists. I could feel the grin spreading across my face. No matter how vast his mana capacity was, Gervasio would not stand a chance against me now that he no longer had a schtappe and was trapped inside Gilessenmeyer’s country gate.



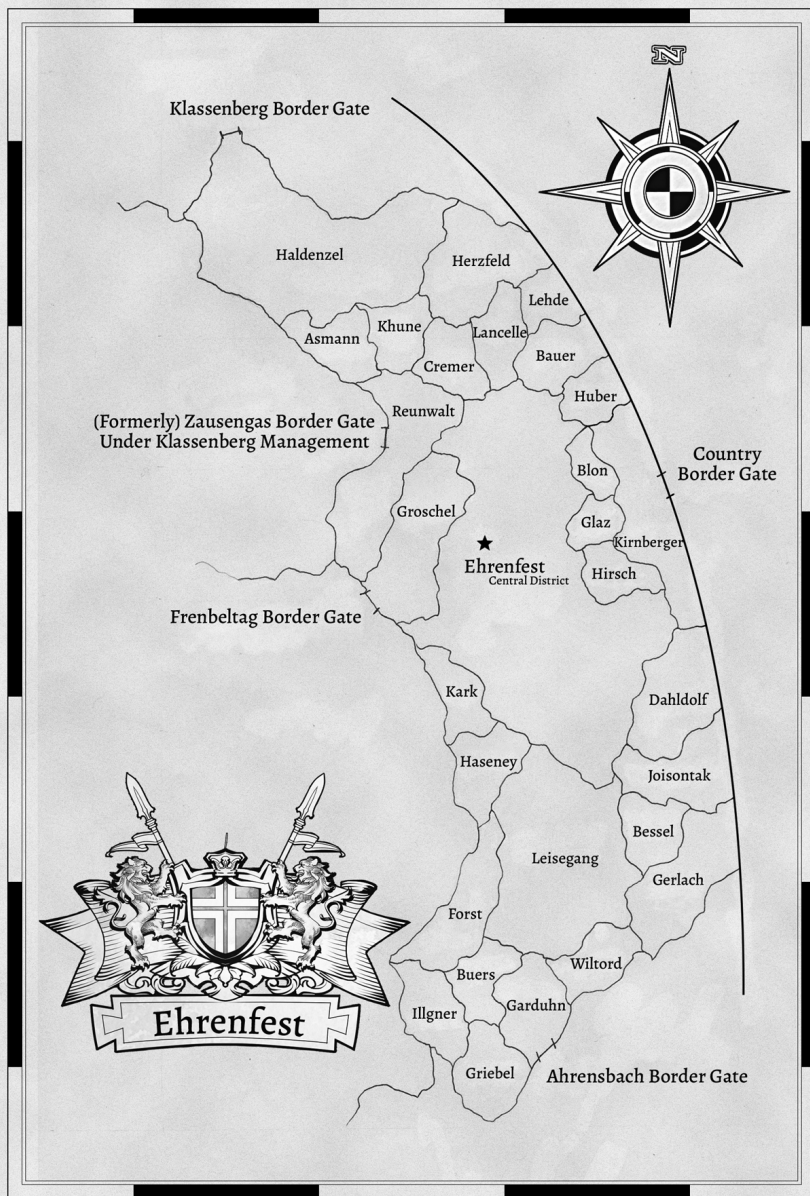
“Lord Ferdinand, can I assume we were quick enough?” Eckhart asked.

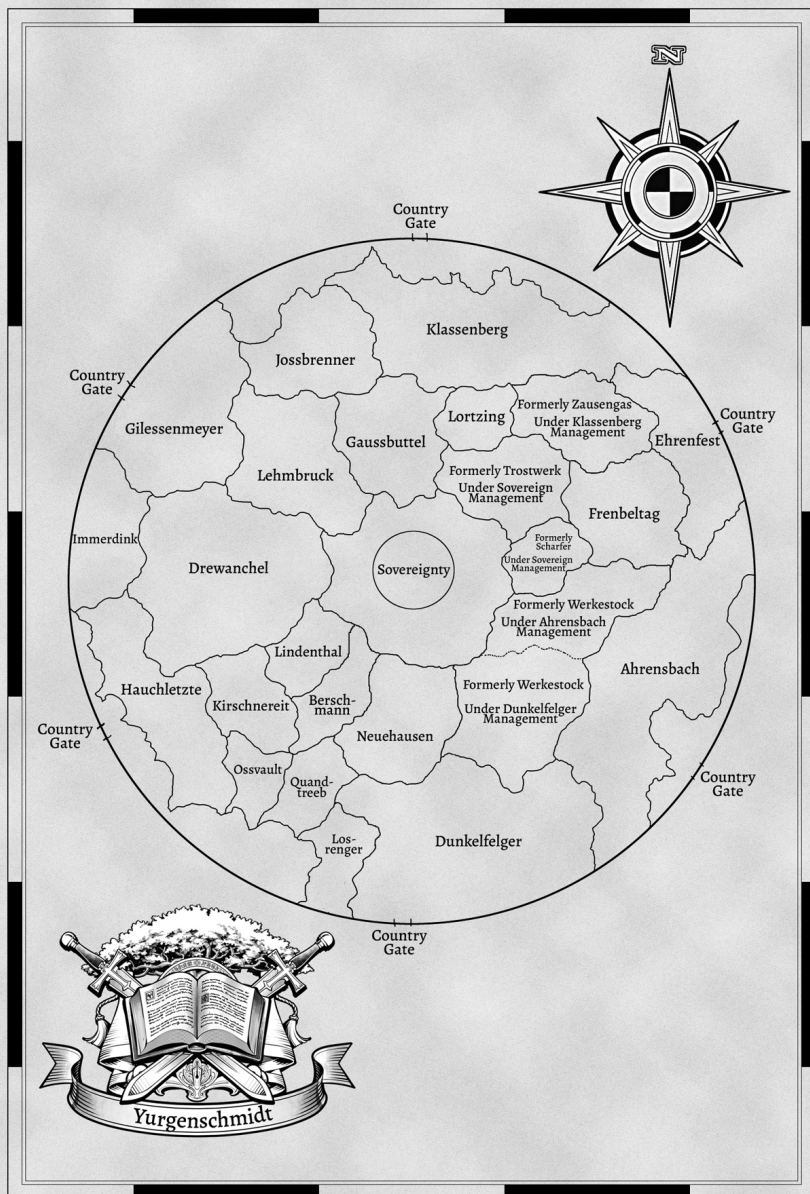
I slowly looked around the room. Anastasius had completed the spell and now waited impatiently for my next words, as did those with him. I nodded at Eckhart, then made my announcement: “Gervasio’s medal has been destroyed. He can no longer become the Zent. We are victorious.”

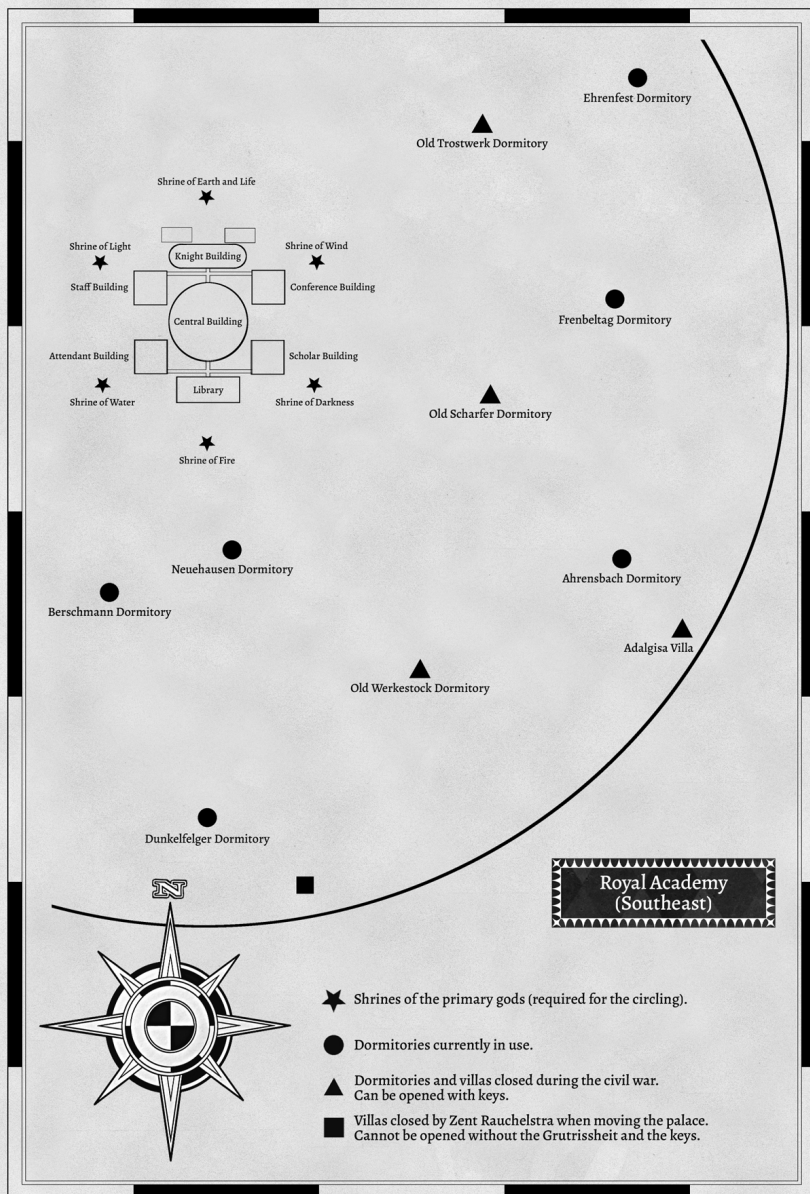
His plans would never come to pass. He could no longer demand that Ahrensbach’s foundation be returned, that Rozemyne be sent to the Sovereign temple, that his accomplices go unpunished, that Detlinde and Leonzio be set free, or that I be sent to Lanzenave as a feystone.

“This concludes our business in the Sovereign temple,” I said. “Immanuel must be detained as a criminal, but the other priests can be left to their own devices. Let us return to the auditorium and arrange a meeting with the royal family.”

My battle against Gervasio, my most dangerous foe, was over. But I would not secure the future I desired simply by standing around and enjoying my victory. Meeting with the royals, choosing the new Zent, having Erwaermen grant his approval... There was still much to be done, so I changed my focus from defeating my opposition to twisting the upcoming meeting in my favor.







Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 10*.

This volume's prologue was from Detlinde's perspective. It covers how she and Alstede spent their time in the villa and the way she perceives her situation as the self-proclaimed next Zent. I considered it a good opportunity to describe the internals of the villa, which are barely touched upon in the main story because Rozemyne basically never goes inside. The events covered in the prologue are the last time things ever go Detlinde's way.

The main story focused on the battle at the Royal Academy. Despite her intense fear of feystones, Rozemyne went with Ferdinand and the others to the Adalgisa villa. Then they went to the library to rescue Professor Solange and the auditorium to obstruct Gervasio, who had gone to the Garden of Beginnings. Everyone was busy—and in hindsight, there sure was a lot of moving around.

Rozemyne's rampages were as healthy as ever. She kept getting in Gervasio's way without meaning to; accidentally created a whirlpool in the auditorium; urged a goddess to descend, terrifying those with her; and caused a stir in both Hauchletzte and Klassenberg. If only I had the spare time and pages... I would have written a chapter from the perspective of the nobles who saw their country gate start shining out of nowhere.

The epilogue was written from Sieglinde's perspective. She and the other women providing rear support were stationed in the Dunkelfelger Dormitory and played a crucial role assisting the knights who had gone into battle. Once the fighting was over, Sieglinde and the aub had a conversation. I tried to focus on the thought process of a greater duchy that had supported Trauerqual during and after the civil war—something Rozemyne would never normally experience.

Again, I shortened the main section of this volume so I could include another collection of short stories: "The Battle for the

Sovereignty.” My aim was to explore parts of the conflict Rozemyne didn’t see. Immanuel showed us how the Sovereign temple was involved and what Raublut did to lay the groundwork for manipulating Hildebrand. Anastasius covered the state of the royal villas and the fight against the Sovereign knight commander. Magdalena focused on the royal palace’s security and the final showdown against Raublut. Gervasio spoke about Rozemyne’s abnormality and the descent of the goddess. And then there was Ferdinand, who showed us the conclusion of his battle against Gervasio. Everyone has their own motivations—things they wish to protect and gain.

Alstede, Detlinde’s older sister and Georgine’s daughter, was newly designed for this volume. She’s a timid, obedient noblewoman, which really shines through in her appearance. Because her capture and interrogation were illustrated, her nightclothes were designed as well. She looks even younger—and cuter—with her hair down.

As a note to everyone who’s been supporting me, in an amazing development, *Ascendance of a Bookworm* won first place in the tankobon category of *This Light Novel Is Amazing! 2023*. Thank you to everyone who voted.

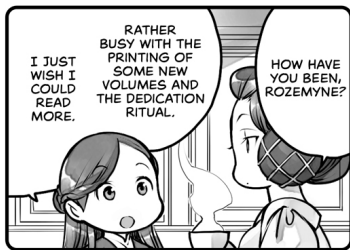
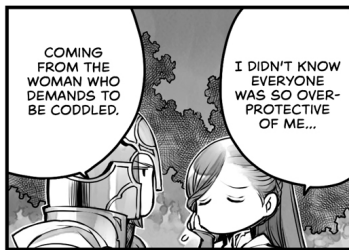
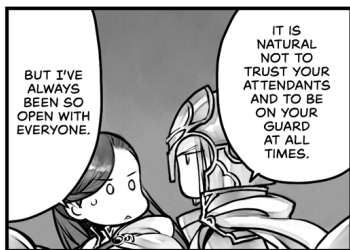
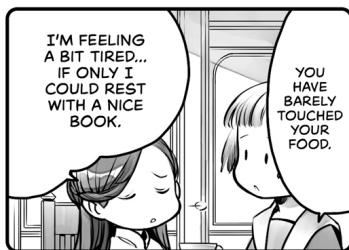
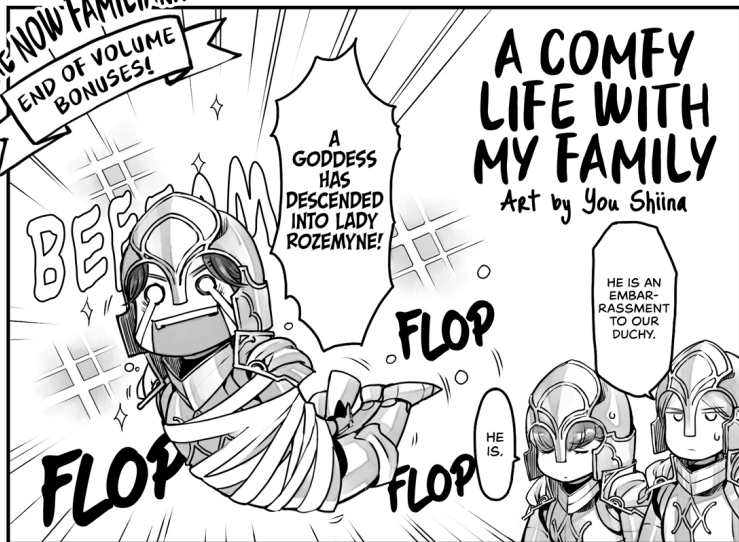
This volume’s cover art represents the Zent race, though Rozemyne doesn’t need to hide under silver cloth until she returns to the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Her goddess-dyed mana causes her to shine!

The color illustration depicts the battle for the auditorium. It looks so cool and climactic. My favorite part is the crested surcoats worn by the aub and the royal family. Shiina-sama—thank you very much.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 11.

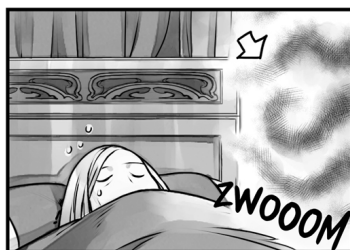
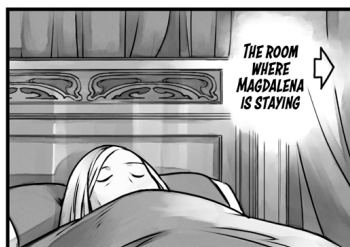
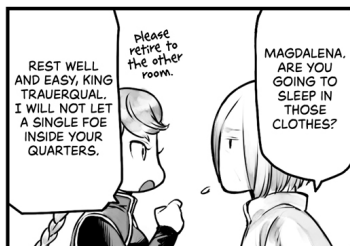
September 2022, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
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BONUSES!

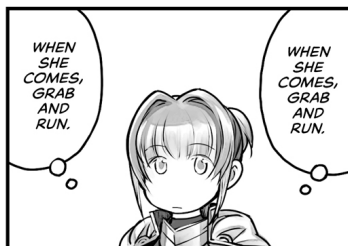


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10 Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume

by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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